



Written by
**KAORU
SHINOZAKI**
Illustrated by
KWKM

FAILURE FRAME

I BECAME THE STRONGEST AND **ANNIHILATED EVERYTHING**

WITH LOW-LEVEL SPELLS



Table of Contents

Color Inserts

Title Page

Copyrights and Credits

Table of Contents Page

Prologue

Chapter 1: Monroy

Chapter 2: The Leopardman and the Young Girl

Chapter 3: With the Lord of the Flies

Chapter 4: A Dark Strategy and a Disappearance

Chapter 5: Good Night

Epilogue

Afterword

Newsletter





SERAS ASHRAIN

LISBETH

Lis began to strip down, and Seras wrung out the girl's soaked clothes, heavy with rain. She squeezed the cloth in her hands tight, sending a stream of water spilling across the cave floor.

She was overtaken by a strange instinct, and before she even realized what she was doing, she found herself lifting one of Too-ka's shirts to her face.

Seras inhaled deeply.

She closed her eyes, envisioning her master, her heart calling his name.



*"Sir
Too-ka..."*

FAILURE FRAME

I BECAME THE STRONGEST AND ANNIHILATED EVERYTHING

WITH LOW-LEVEL SPELLS



WRITTEN BY
KAORU SHINOZAKI

ILLUSTRATED BY
KWKM



Seven Seas Entertainment

HAZURE WAKU NO [JOUTAI IJOU SUKIRU] DE SAIKYOU NI NATTA ORE
GA SUBETE WO JUURIN SURU MADE VOL. 3

© 2019 Kaoru Shinozaki

Illustrations by KWKM

First published in Japan in 2019 by OVERLAP Inc., Ltd., Tokyo.

English translation rights arranged with OVERLAP Inc., Ltd., Tokyo.

No portion of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form without written permission from the copyright holders. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. Any information or opinions expressed by the creators of this book belong to those individual creators and do not necessarily reflect the views of Seven Seas Entertainment or its employees.

Seven Seas press and purchase enquiries can be sent to Marketing Manager Lianne Sentar at press@gomanga.com. Information regarding the distribution and purchase of digital editions is available from Digital Manager CK Russell at digital@gomanga.com.

Seven Seas and the Seven Seas logo are trademarks of Seven Seas Entertainment. All rights reserved.

Follow Seven Seas Entertainment online at sevenseasentertainment.com.

TRANSLATION: Ben Trethewey

ADAPTATION: Misha Fletcher

COVER DESIGN: Hanase Qi

LOGO DESIGN: George Panella

INTERIOR DESIGN: Clay Gardner

INTERIOR LAYOUT: D. Ring

COPY EDITOR: Meg van Huygen

PROOFREADER: Stephanie Cohen

LIGHT NOVEL EDITOR: Rebecca Scoble

PRINT MANAGER: Rhiannon Rasmussen-Silverstein

PRODUCTION MANAGER: Lissa Pattillo

MANAGING EDITOR: Julie Davis

ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER: Adam Arnold

PUBLISHER: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 978-1-64827-265-3

Printed in Canada

First Printing: December 2021

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE

1. MONROY
2. THE LEOPARDMAN AND
THE YOUNG GIRL
3. WITH THE LORD OF THE FLIES
4. A DARK STRATEGY AND
A DISAPPEARANCE
5. GOOD NIGHT

EPILOGUE

Download all your Fav Light Novels from [Just Light Novels](#)

Prologue

THE BLACK DRAGON KNIGHTS had fallen.

The news spread through the continent like wildfire, shocking all who heard, but that wasn't the end of the story. One great mystery remained in the aftermath of the Elite Five's untimely demise.

Who killed them?

At the southernmost border of the Kingdom of Magnar lay an ancient castle—the White Citadel of Protection. Beyond the border was the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters. If the Nightwall was Magnar's key to holding the north, the citadel was vital to the defense of their southern borders. Inside, the gathering of the wolves was at hand, representatives from each country seated around a circular table.

The White Wolf King of Magnar, and behind him the vice-captain of his White Wolf Riders.

The Queen of Yonato, shadowed by her Holy Priest.

Mira's Wildly Beautiful Emperor, who had come alone, without his subordinates.

The Monster Slayer King of Ulza, accompanied by the chief of his Monster Slayer Knights.

The Wise King of Alion, with the Goddess Vicius looming behind him.

The White Citadel of Protection was the perfect location for the representatives to meet. The Demon King's armies were amassing in northern Magnar, and the countries at the conference had brought their elite forces with them, ready to respond to any threats at the slightest notice.

"To think a force as powerful as the Elite Five could be completely destroyed," mused the White Wolf King.

"I admit I have no love for Bakoss, but those warriors, especially that Civit Gartland...there was no denying their strength."

The White Wolf King's voice was as cold and sharp as tempered

steel when he responded.

“Are we even sure of these reports that they perished in battle? I can’t imagine the Strongest Man in the World would be defeated so easily in a fight.”

He looked pointedly at Jin, the Monster Slayer King of Ulza, who was sitting directly across from him.

Discourteous and brash as ever, thought Jin.

He obviously asked the question because the Elite Five’s bodies had been discovered in a forest in Ulza. Jin, unfortunately, didn’t have the answer he knew the White Wolf King was looking for.

This whole business is a mess. I couldn’t have refused them passage through our borders even if I wanted to!

Jin took a long pause before answering, choosing his words carefully.

“I saw the remains myself before they were returned to Bakoss for burial.”

He glanced at the empty seat at the table. The Emperor of Bakoss had turned down the invitation to attend. Who could blame him? His whole empire’s military strength had been wiped out overnight—the loss of the Elite Five was a serious blow.

Magnar’s White Wolf Riders.

The Holy Priest of Yonato.

Mira’s Wildly Beautiful Emperor.

Ulza’s Dragonslayer.

Alion’s Heroes from Another World.

Each country had its own key defensive forces, and now Bakoss had nothing. The imperial court must’ve been in an uproar.

“We’re investigating the circumstances surrounding their deaths. Right now, we have nothing close to a full picture of what happened that day.”

The White Wolf King set his elbows on the table and grunted. He was a broad and intimidating man. His harsh gray eyes scrutinized me, like he thought he could literally see the truth.

I can’t look away—he’ll think I’m trying to deceive him.

Jin wanted this investigation over with as soon as possible. Ever since the invasion of Neah, the Black Dragon Knights had been a thorn in Jin's side. They had trespassed freely into his territory, no longer even notifying Ulza of their incursions. Now that danger was gone—great news for Ulza.

I hope Bakoss just gets weaker, thought Jin. To be honest, I'd love to reward whoever did this to them! If they swore loyalty to Ulza, I could grant them a peerage in exchange for joining the Monster Slayer Knights... No, that might be too bold. I need to consider how the others would view a move like that. Still, this investigation only needs to go far enough to satisfy the Goddess.

Apparently, nothing on Jin's face aroused the White Wolf King's suspicions, and he turned his gaze to the others.

"Does Alion have any news on this matter?"

He looked straight at the Goddess, passing over the king without a second thought. The Wise King of Alion showed no sign that he resented being ignored.

"Goddess," the king prompted.

"Please, allow me," she replied. She still stood behind him, smiling elegantly.

Beautiful as ever, and perfectly unreadable no matter the circumstances. She looks more regal than I do. No one could hope to compete with her.

Jin envied her divinity. Years had passed since he had last seen her, but she hadn't aged a day.

Will she ever die, I wonder?

"I'm not omniscient, so all I can do is assemble the facts we have at our disposal. It appears the Elite Five were pursuing Seras Ashrain," she said.

Jin already knew that.

"The former captain of Neah's Band of the Holy Knights? I believe she disappeared following the Bakoss invasion, no?" asked the Queen of Yonato.

"It seems she was traveling through Ulza," Jin replied, recognizing his cue. "She was recently sighted in the south, pursued by a group of

bounty hunters known as the White Walkers. It's rumored that she disguised herself with the power of the spirits while on the run." He was more inclined to answer the Queen than the White Wolf King.

"Where are those bounty hunters now?" she asked.

"Their corpses were discovered in the Dark Forest, maimed by monsters. Just like the Elite Five were when we found them."

"What of Seras Ashrain?"

"No corpse, but there were bloody scraps of clothing... We believe she was seriously wounded in the fighting."

The Queen was silent, deep in thought with her brow furrowed.

"Perhaps she's already dead and her body was devoured by monsters. Or...is it possible she escaped and is recovering from her injuries in Mills?"

"There's no evidence of any injured person visiting Mills or any of the surrounding villages, and the residents have no reason to hide her. It's possible that she fled towards the coast—there were some tracks in that direction," Jin continued.

I have to make it clear we're actively pursuing this investigation, thought Jin. *That I have control over my own people.*

"However, given the amount of blood at the scene, it's hard to imagine she was strong enough to escape even the weakest monster. Her recovery would require healing techniques only used by the highest-ranking members of our Monster Slayer Knights, your own Holy Priest, or those Heroes from Another World with their special abilities."

"Is it possible she used some unknown power of the spirits to heal herself?" asked the Queen sharply.

Jin's words caught in his throat—he knew little of the elven spirits.

"As far as I recall, that's not possible," said the Goddess, stepping in to answer for him. "I have lived long on this continent, and there are no spirits with the power to heal wounds. Even if such a spirit existed beyond my knowledge, surely the girl would have simply healed herself, not left a trail for us to follow."

"I see. You're right," said the Queen.

What a relief.

Come to think of it, the Ruins of Disposal were concealed within the Dark Forest... Jin knew all about the underground tomb that the Goddess used for her *disposals*.

But the scouting party's most recent report said that nothing had changed. There's no need for Ulza to involve ourselves any further with that place...

Jin realized the Goddess was watching him, and he made himself smile at her. He feared the Goddess and would never dream of opposing her. Only days before, she had recalled her disciple from Ulza. Disciples of Vicius were dispatched to every country on the continent to act as observers, and she had apparently decided that Ulza no longer needed watching. Jin was certain that meant she had absolute confidence in his ability to lead.

Well now...I should probably move the conversation along, away from talk of the Dark Forest.

"I-incidentally, speaking of Neah, have you heard the news of the Holy Emperor?"

"Him?" laughed the Goddess. "After his abdication, I assumed he was enjoying retirement somewhere within the Bakoss Empire, no?"

"He passed away last night," said Jin. "Apparently he lost his mind before the end. Wailing incomprehensibly and demanding to be brought a corpse, if you believe the reports."

"Hmph!" the White Wolf King snorted. "He hands over his country without a fight, then tries to live out the rest of his days in luxury on his enemy's coin. Truly a disgrace to the title he once bore."

The White Wolf King had never liked the Bakoss Empire and disapproved of their invasion of Neah, but he also held nothing but disdain for the Holy Emperor of Neah, who had surrendered without a fight.

Better than struggling just to die a meaningless death at their hands, though, isn't it?

Jin was relieved that the conversation had shifted and tried to steer it further.

"We were counting on the Black Dragon Knights in our fight against the Demon King. How would you recommend we proceed after their loss, Goddess?"

The Goddess Vicius smiled.

“As you say, the death of the Elite Five is a great loss to our Sacred Alliance. No doubt the Heroes from Another World will become all the more vital to our future success. Alion thanks you all for your contributions to their training—the dispatching of the Four Holy Elders and the Dragonslayer. As you are on the frontlines in the war against the Demon King’s armies, I can’t expect much from you, Magnar...but Wildly Beautiful Emperor, I’m counting on more support from you once the fighting begins in earnest.”

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor Falkendotzine, a handsome young man who had thus far been silent, was idly playing with his golden hair.

“Great demons at the gates, Alion prospers,” he mused.

His voice was clear but sad. Who was it that said he spoke like the morning frost?

The Goddess’s smile didn’t waver.

“Oh? How *profound* of you.”

“When the root of all evil appears, our nations have no choice but to turn to Alion,” he said.

“There’s nothing I can do about that, is there? The people of this world are weakened by the presence of Demon King essence and can hardly be expected to fight at their full strength. Not even the descendants of heroic blood are immune.”

That’s why we need the heroes in the first place. Not even gods can resist the effects of Demon King essence, yet for some reason those heroes can.

“I must summon heroes into this world, explain their duty to them, convince them to aid us, practically raise them as my own! I appreciate the support I receive from your nations, naturally, and yet... we in Alion are the only ones who hold this summoning power, are we not? We alone bear the greatest burden—responsibility for their success or failure. Our fate is bound with the fates of these heroes. Alion is a victim in this whole affair.”

The Goddess spread her arms slightly, almost helplessly.

“To whom much is given, much will be expected, no? Have you any objections, Wildly Beautiful Emperor?”

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor sighed elegantly.

“What of the legend of the God-killer?”

The Goddess clapped her hands together delicately and smirked at him.

“It’s a rather long story. Is now really the time, I wonder?”

“...”

“Oh? You can’t go quiet on me now, that will not do! Have I said anything *wrong*? You know everything, don’t you? You are the sole authority here? Have you never thought, just for a second, you might be mistaken? Are you quite well?”



The Wildly Beautiful Emperor gave a short laugh, as if he'd been trying to provoke her and was satisfied with the response.

"Excuse me for interrupting, Vicius," he said, politely gesturing at her to go on. "Continue, please."

"*Oh ho*, strange as ever, aren't you? Please don't misunderstand me. Your duty is to protect the Empire of Mira, not Alion. But I'm counting on your Band of the Sun in the battles to come."

"Are you done?"

"Hm? That's all I have to say."

Jin wasn't even part of the conversation, but it was making him sweat.

He just can't take a hint. He's strange, but he's the strongest warrior that the Empire of Mira has to offer.

"Let us get back on track."

The Goddess stepped forward, crowding the Wise King of Alion's seat at the table.

"The Nightwall has fallen. We all know the Demon King's armies are on the move. Our alliance must now brace itself, and we must focus our energies on training Alion's heroes as rapidly as possible to fight this threat."

"With the loss of the Elite Five, we'll have to band together more tightly than ever to survive," said the Queen.

Behind her stood Yonato's Holy Priest, who was staring intently at the Wildly Beautiful Emperor.

I hear those two get along like cats and dogs...

The White Wolf King stroked his square jaw.

"I have to ask you all once more. Do you believe the Elite Five were killed by this Seras Ashrain?" he asked.

Everybody seated at the table clearly had their doubts that Seras Ashrain was responsible. There had to at least be someone else involved. But nobody had an answer as to who that someone could be. The Heroes from Another World had all been in Alion at the time, and someone would have noticed a military presence where the incident took place.

Who could face Civit Gartland? It was unthinkable. The Four Holy Elders, the Dragonslayer, the Sword of Courage...certainly not. Maybe the Disciples of Vicius? They're the only ones who might've have a chance of defeating him, but none were in the area at the time. Even the White Walkers are dead. It's unlikely it was a heroic blood warrior... What about that Forbidden Witch who lives in the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters? I don't hear so many tales of her strength, but it's possible...

Jin had no idea who could have done this.

Is there some incredibly strong warrior who is somehow yet unknown to us?

"If a human warrior did this, we might consider inviting them to join us in our fight against the Demon King," he suggested.

"It doesn't bode well if this was the work of monsters," noted the Queen.

"There haven't been reports of monsters in the south, have there?" asked the White Wolf King. As he spoke, one of his underlings returned to the room and passed him a message. The King nodded and turned back to the rest of the table.

"We've discovered a group in Ulza who are claiming responsibility for the attack."

Jin quickly turned to look back at the chief of his Monster Slayer Knights.

Discovered in Ulza? In my own land? How did a neighboring country get this information before us?

In response to Jin's confused, desperate gaze, the Monster Slayer Knight captain simply hung his head.

"They're claiming that they killed Civit Gartland and all the members of the Elite Five with cursed magic," the White Wolf King continued.

Ah... There have been rumors of strange curses of late. Were they the work of the same people who did this? Who could do such a thing?

As if to answer Jin's unasked question, the White Wolf King spoke.

"The Elite Five were killed by users of cursed magic...a group known as Ashint."

Chapter 1: Monroy

THE SKY STRETCHED CLEAR AND BLUE over the picturesque buildings below as we approached Monroy, capital of the Kingdom of Ulza. It looked just like what you'd expect from a bustling fantasy city centered around a grand castle.

First time I've seen a walled city in this world. All I got to see in Alion were the rooms they led our class through, then it was a straight shot to the Ruins of Disposal.

Piggymaru gave a small “Squee~!” from under my robes, content as ever.

“Stay hidden in there, little buddy.”

“Squee!”

It had been several days since our battle with the Black Dragon Knights, and we'd finally reached Monroy.

No signs that we're being followed—yet.

We had stopped at three villages along the way, and in each one we'd heard travelers and mercenaries muttering to each other about what had happened in the Dark Forest. The death of the Elite Five... The disappearance of Seras Ashrain...

All anyone talked about was that these things had happened, though. Almost nothing about how Bakoss and the other countries were reacting to the news.

Maybe we'll hear more in the capital.

I looked back at the huge gate we had just easily passed through. We weren't even questioned, and there was no sign that anybody was desperately searching for Seras.

Makes sense—it was another country's forces that were wiped out, after all, not Ulza's. They can't be all that invested in finding out who did it.

“You know, Ulza might be happy that the insanely strong knights near their border are out of the picture.”

“It's possible,” said Seras, walking behind me.

Her face was different now, as was her name—she was calling herself Misura.

“The Monster Slaying Knights of Ulza aren’t considered quite as strong as the forces of the other countries. They would have certainly fallen in battle against the Black Dragon Knights,” she said.

“You think they were protected in some way? Like maybe the Goddess was helping them?”

“It’s possible, but Ulza also has the Dragonslayer at their disposal. They’ve summoned him as a show of strength, I believe.”

Deterrence, huh? Still, how much of a deterrence can one man really be?

“Even the Dragonslayer never tried to drive the Elite Five away from Ulza’s borders, then?” I asked.

“He could never have beaten Civit Gartland. While Civit overshadowed the others, the Elite Five members were all incredibly powerful warriors in their own rights...and I’ve heard that the Dragonslayer is quite lazy by nature. He was avoiding a confrontation.”

Guess the Dragonslayer’s kind of a slacker? Anyway...

“Should we figure out where we’re staying tonight?” I asked.

We decided to stay overnight in Monroy so we could prepare to enter the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters.

I checked the bag on my back—my copy of *Forbidden Arts: The Complete Works* was still in there.

There are all kinds of recipes for medicines in there. Maybe I can pick up some of the ingredients in Monroy. I’ll have to buy the equipment to make them too. There are probably things I couldn’t buy in Mils that I’ll be able to find here in the capital.

“Why don’t we stay here?” I asked Seras, stopping in front of an inexpensive-looking inn.

“Separate rooms, right?”

The capital was so crowded...not like the small town of Mils, where even the guards at the gate could pick out an unfamiliar face. Back there, our presence alone was enough to make us look suspicious.

The capital was different, though. There were people everywhere, including plenty who looked like travelers or visitors. There wasn’t any

sign that Ulza was seriously investigating the Elite Five incident, and even if it was, Seras's appearance and clothes were different now too. I didn't think we needed to be overly cautious, so I figured it'd be okay to stick together inside the city instead of splitting up to avoid drawing attention.

That said, Seras was a woman. A man and a woman sharing the same room... Separate rooms were probably a better idea.

Seras interrupted my train of thought.

"It would be a waste of money to get two. Perhaps it would be prudent to book a single room, unless you have some objection to it, Master," she said.

"I'm a guy, you know."

Seras looked shocked. She covered her hand with her mouth, thought for a moment, and cleared her throat.

"It's not a problem for me," she said, dropping her hand. "After all, we slept in the same small room in the Mils ruins. I don't believe it will cause an issue."

I did get Piggymaru to distract you, then put you to sleep with my skills...

"If it's okay with you, it's okay with me," I said.

"It would normally bother me...but if it's you, I don't mind."

Well, my foster dad *did* always tell me to watch how I spent my money.

"Okay, then, let's get a single room. No complaints about it once we're in there, got it?"

"Y-yes, of course."

She really does lower her guard once she starts trusting someone. Even more once she's pledged her loyalty. I never expected she'd be this open with me.

We headed to the front desk of the inn and asked to reserve a room. The innkeeper watched as we wrote our names in the ledger, then glanced back up at us.

"You two mercenaries?" he asked.

"Yeah. Not registered with the guild, though."

I hear there are a lot of unregistered mercenaries—there shouldn't be anything weird about that.

“You must be here for the Bloodsport Colosseum.”

“That's a big part of it, yeah.”

It was a convenient lie—it wouldn't be unusual for people to visit Monroy just to see the bloodsports.

Seras had told me about the Bloodsport Colosseum before we arrived. She described it as a fighting arena that sounded like the gladiatorial colosseum in ancient Rome. The fighters were called bloodsport gladiators, she said.

“It's a popular form of entertainment for the public now,” she had explained, “but it began as an initiation ritual for new members of mercenary bands. I believe that mercenaries still use the colosseum to recruit new members. Most of the fighters are either mercenaries hoping to make names for themselves, or slaves sent into the ring to make money for their owners.”

So there are two organizations behind the Bloodsport Colosseum—the Baron of Ulza and the mercenaries' guild. I was right to bring Seras along with me. She knows so much common-sense stuff about this world. She's like a walking human...no, elf dictionary.

After booking a room, we left the inn and headed up the street towards a cluster of shops.

“The Mercenaries' Guild has a lot of influence around here, huh?” I asked, looking up at a sign with a scroll of parchment painted on it.

“Guilds have a wide reach, so you can rely on them no matter where you find yourself. The Wizards' Guild and Mercenaries' Guild are the two most influential,” said Seras.

The Mercenaries' Guild... They were involved with the clearing of the ruins in Mils, weren't they?

First, we went to buy equipment, looking for tools that would be easy to carry on our journey. I hung back and let Seras argue with the shopkeepers over prices. After we left the store, I instinctively put a hand to my pocket to check on the pouch of blue dragonstones within.

I'm not exchanging these for coin—not yet. Putting them out on the market would start rumors about the person who sold them. I don't want to draw attention to myself like that unless I have to. We have more than

enough money for now.

Between the money from the skeletons in the Ruins of Disposal, those four bounty hunters who'd been tailing Seras, and the coin I'd gotten selling the stuff I found in the Mils ruins, we were actually pretty flush.

We're lucky not to have to worry about travel expenses, but we should still keep an eye on how we spend our money. Don't want to draw attention.

"Your haggling back there was amazing as always," I said. Seras was an incredible negotiator.

She gave me a dry smile.

"I'm cheap, that's all," she said.

"Frugal, I'd say. No need to put yourself down like that."

"My master is good at winning over his subordinates, I see."

She's taking this "master" thing really seriously.

"Change of subject, but I want to find out what's up with that weird black egg we found in the Mils ruins."

"You might want to try the Monroy public library. It's run by the state," said Seras.

If not even the walking elf dictionary Seras knows about this black egg, there's not much chance that I'm going to find answers in publicly available books.

"Maybe we can ask the witch. She might know something," I said. With that, we decided to head to a tavern for dinner.

In addition to being a convenient spot to eat, taverns were the perfect place to get the latest news and rumors. We ordered some food and herb water first, and also some wine—not to drink, of course, but to blend in with the crowd. This world might not have any laws about underage drinking, but with my parents' excessive drinking, I had bad memories of the stuff. No fault of the drink itself, but I couldn't bring myself to like it.

Seras drank a little but didn't seem to enjoy it. As we ate, I eavesdropped on the conversations around us.

"Hey, ya hear the latest?"

"Whooh~! Now what?"

“The Black Dragon Knights!”

“Again? Jeez.”

“Nah, nah. The guys that did ’em in!”

“Hm? You hear something I haven’t?”

“Right from the palace!”

“Wow, you got an inside source?”

I tensed slightly, waiting to hear what they’d say.

“Apparently that Seras Ashrain, the one they’re saying did it? She’s already dead!”

Seras choked on her food.

“Mhh?! Mhh!”

I handed her a cup of water as she coughed.

“You all right?”

She drank slowly, then gave a sigh of relief.

“Thank you. I-I’m sorry about that,” she said.

Hey, I’d be surprised too if someone suddenly declared me dead.

The men continued their conversation.

“Revenge for the Elite Five, y’think?”

“Nah, she lost! Elite Five killed her in the fight.”

“Eh? So who took out the Elite Five?”

“Heh, so you haven’t heard! It was Ashint that killed ’em. Ashint.”
Ashint?

“Ah, that group that curses people, yeah?! I’ve heard of them!”

“They’ve been telling anyone who’ll listen that they took out the Elite Five with their curses.”

Seras and I exchanged looks.

“What do you think?” I asked, my voice lowered.

“I’ve heard rumors about cursed magic,” she admitted.

“Can anybody use it?”

“No, not exactly.”

Seras went on to explain the two types of magic: incantations and spells. *Three, if you add the skills of heroes from another world, I guess.*

“What about your spirit armor?”

“Well, my spirit armor is...”

According to Seras, there weren’t many elves that could summon the power of the spirits to fight, so her spirit armor wasn’t exactly common. The people in the tavern in Mils hadn’t known much about it, either.

Anyway, this cursed magic stuff was a new development, all thanks to this group called Ashint.

“Rumor has it they worship the Cursed God,” said Seras.

“So they’re just trying to boost their profile, huh?”

It’s good news for us if everybody thinks they killed the Elite Five. The truth will get out eventually, but this will give us some cover in the meantime. Hopefully we’ll be in the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters before anybody finds out what really happened. I wonder where these Ashint members are hiding anyw—

“We are the guards of Ashint!” a booming voice announced as the door was kicked open. Purple-robed men muscled their way into the busy tavern.

“We are the cursed soldiers of Ashint, protectors of Lord Muaji, spawn of the Cursed God! Clear a space at once!”

Speak of the devil.

“Hmm...” I dipped the spoon into my soup and sipped quietly.

A large group in the back was forced to give up their table, but they did it without complaint. The Ashint members took their seats.

“Bring us some drinks—and be quick about it! Don’t you know we’re the saviors of Ulza?!”

No one’s going to challenge them. After all, they’re claiming they killed the Elite Five. Nobody here can prove they didn’t—except us. They’re not trying to hide it, though, are they? They wiped out the strongest knights on the continent—that gives them a lot of power. Is Ulza already trying to get them on their side?

Most of the patrons kept their distance from the group, but I continued to watch the Ashint members. There was nothing threatening

about them at all—no powerful presence like Civit had given off. They just seemed to be enjoying their drinks.

It's probably safe to leave them alone for the time being. Be good decoys for me, will you? I took a few moments to memorize their faces.

It wasn't long before the mood in the tavern returned to normal. I downed the rest of my water and turned to Seras.

"Let's finish up this food and head back to the inn."

"Understood. Just a moment." I hadn't realized Seras wasn't done eating. She hurried to finish.

"Take your time, it's okay."

"I-I'm so sorry. *Munch, munch...*"

While she ate, I listened to the people sitting behind me.

"Hey, ain't those the Black Dragon Killers?"

"Yeah. Well, even if it turns out someone else did them in, Ashint's just gonna claim it was their curses that lit the spark."

Hmm... I suppose that's one way to claim responsibility.

"Who else d'ya think coulda killed them? They were the freakin' Elite Five! Nobody that could go toe-to-toe with them was within three days of Ulza! Ha ha, unless you believe that Seras Ashrain somehow killed them all with her dying breath!"

Seras made a choking noise and thumped her chest, her expression pained.

She isn't used to hearing herself come up in conversation. She's surprisingly easy to catch off guard in some ways.

"Only person who could even come close would be that leopardman from the Bloodsport Colosseum!" one of the men continued.

"Ah, a real monster, that one."

They must've been talking about some famous bloodsport gladiator.

"No, wait, I got it! What about the Forbidden Witch? I bet she killed 'em."

"The one that lives in the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters? You know she probably ain't even there anymore, right?"

“Nah, she’s there. I hear she’s a real strong mage, you know. Maybe strong enough to off the Elite Five.”

“C’mon, nobody’s seen her in over a decade. Living with all them monsters? If she’s there, she’s dead.”

“She’s not dead. Y’know, there’s someone around here who’s actually met her. Even knows where she is, if you believe the rumors.”

Huh?

“She’s somewhere near the freakin’ Great Ruins, everybody knows that!”

“No, I mean they know *where* in the Great Ruins she lives.”

“What, you think the Forbidden Witch has got friends?”

“I ain’t sure... But look, you know who it is? It—”

The other man interrupted, sounding annoyed.

“I don’t give a rat’s ass about some witch—we don’t even know if she’s alive or dead. Anyhow, listen, I got a story. I hear they got this wench in Ablom that looked just like the Goddess of Alion! Face, clothes... Everythin’!” he continued.

“Yeah?”

“But then in walks Baron Zuan, and he ain’t happy with the likeness. Slices her clean in half on the spot!”

“Ha ha ha ha! That’s a heck of a story!”

“So then he starts asking for a wench that looks like the Holy Priest of Yonato, and—”

I need to know more about this person who’s met the witch...

I stood up from my chair, a few silver coins in hand.

“*Munch munch...* Master?”

“I’ll be right back.” I walked back to the men I’d been listening to.

“Excuse me, do you mind if I join you?” I said.

“Huh? Whaddya want, kid?”

“Sorry to interrupt. I’d like to hear more about the Forbidden Witch you were talking about.”

“Huh?” I’d cut the man off in the middle of his story about wenches, and he looked upset.

“What’s your problem, kid? Think you can just walk up and—”

“Oh, but first let me buy you gentlemen a drink... No, two drinks. Order some food as well, please. My treat, of course.”

The man’s expression changed in an instant and he laughed loudly.

“Right, right! The Forbidden Witch! Sorry about that, I got distracted!” The other man seemed pleased to have the chance to finish his story.

“Good on you, kid! Fulfillin’ your curiosity is the real treasure of youth, yeah? Let this old man tell you a story! Hey, waitress, bring us another round!”

He motioned for me to sit, so I did.

That was easy.

“So the one who’s met that witch of yours is one of the strongest bloodsport gladiators in Monroy. Eve Speed!”

A bloodsport gladiator, eh?

“This Eve... She knows where the Forbidden Witch lives?”

“Eve knows, no doubt about it. Told one of her bloodsport gladiator buddies once and the rumor slipped out.”

“Couldn’t she just be lying...?” I asked.

“Maybe, yeah! Truth or not, we’re drinkin’ on your coin~!”

“Oh, of course.”

“All right! Hey, I like you.” The men laughed loudly.

“How can I meet her?”

“I dunno, maybe wait outside the Bloodsport Colosseum? I think the monster even sleeps there. Easiest way would be to ask Baron Zuan, he runs the whole colosseum.”

“I see. Thanks for your help. I’ll leave you to your drinks.”

As I moved to leave, the tavern door swung open again, this time with less yelling. One of the men put his hand on my shoulder.

“You’re in luck, kid.”

The figure in the doorway was wearing light leather armor and had a sword at her belt. Her clothes concealed her slim frame, but I

could sense the muscle underneath. The most striking thing about her, though, was that she had the head of a big cat—probably a leopard, if I remembered a picture I’d seen online—covered in yellow, black, and brown fur. It was like somebody had taken a human body and added a little beast.



“*Hah hah!* First time seeing a leopardman? They’re a pretty rare breed, after all. Guess I shouldn’t be surprised,” said one of the men.

“That’s the strongest bloodsport gladiator in all of Monroy, Eve Speed,” said the other, patting me on the shoulder.

The leopardman sat at the counter, empty chairs on either side of her.

From the owner’s reaction, looks like she’s a regular. Ashint... They’re all still drinking up a storm in back and barely seem to notice that she came in. They’re rowdy, but they aren’t paying any special attention to her.

Scanning the crowd, I got the feeling that everybody in the tavern was used to seeing the famous leopardman. None of them, however, had gone over to talk to her.

“I’ll go and ask her myself whether that Forbidden Witch story is true,” I said.

The man laughed and let go of my shoulder.

“Young and brave, I like that. Us old folks, though, we oughta get going... Drank too much tonight—I’m drunk as a skunk. I wanna taste the crisp night air... *Whooh~!*”

The two men stood up from the table and staggered out of the tavern. I returned to Seras, whispered my instructions in her ear, then took another couple of silver coins from my pouch.

“Okay, here goes,” I said.

“If you need me, I’ll jump in to help,” Seras said.

“I don’t want to cause a fight here, but if it comes to that...”

I don’t want to use my skills in public, so my only defense is Seras’s swordsmanship.

“I’m counting on you,” I said.

Seras tightened her lips and laid a hand across her chest.

“I won’t let you down,” she replied.

I walked over to the counter, took one of the seats next to the leopardman, and ordered an herb water.

“Can I get you anything?” I asked, placing a silver piece in front of her.

She glanced sidewise at me.

“What do you want?” she asked after a short pause.

She can speak human languages then... No problems communicating.

Her voice was powerful—not rough like I’d expected, but clear and easy to understand. Strong, but not defensive.

“I’ve heard the rumors and I wanted to meet you. My name is Hati—I’m a mercenary.”

“Eve Speed,” she replied, then fixed her eyes on me intently, actually looking at me this time.

“First time seeing a leopardman?”

“Yes.”

“You don’t look surprised to see me.”

I can’t be careless with my replies. I don’t know what might set her off...

I grinned back at her.

“I don’t mean to be rude, but I’ve seen all kinds of things on my travels—a leopardman just isn’t all that shocking.”

There was a two-headed one in the Ruins of Disposal, wasn’t there? All kinds of other animal and monster combinations too.

Chomp!

Eve began happily ripping into a piece of meat, licking up the juices that coated her fingers and watching me all the while with her cat-like eyes.

“Looks like you’re really enjoying that,” I said.

“Hmph, you don’t think I’m some kind of savage?” She was watching to see my reaction, sizing me up... I got it.

“I’m not exactly the most sophisticated eater myself. Who cares about manners if the food’s good? Hey, do you bloodsport gladiators ever—”

“Tell me what you want,” said Eve, cutting me off.

“...”

“You aren’t interested in me because of my work in the colosseum, are you?”

I managed an uncomfortable smile.

“Y-you knew, then... Impressive...”

It must’ve been obvious from the way I was acting. Well, I guess that saves me some small talk, at least.

“What do you want from me?” she repeated.

Hmm, willing to hear me out too.

“I’d like to ask about the Forbidden Witch’s location...” I asked, letting myself sound a little nervous.

“She’s in the Land of the Golden-Eyed monsters. Everybody knows that.”

“Yeah, but I was told that you know *exactly* where.”

Eve smiled, and a muffled, growling laugh came from the back of her throat.

“You believe that rumor?”

“It isn’t true, you mean?”

“I’ve been to the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters before, that much is true. Never met the witch though.”

“Okay, but I heard you know where she is.”

“I wandered that place for two weeks, see? Told the guy, heck, maybe it was the Forbidden Witch’s power that saved me—it was a joke. Nothing more.”

“And the joke started the rumor. You really don’t know where the Forbidden Witch is?”

“Sorry, no idea.”

My shoulders sank.

“I see...”

“Sorry I can’t help you out.” Eve finished her meat and wiped off her fingers before she spoke again.

“Why do you want to find her, anyway?”

“Curiosity—I want to be a scholar.” I took out one of the pieces of equipment I’d bought earlier in the day and showed it to Eve. “I’m planning to hire some mercenaries here in Monroy and venture into the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters myself. There might be some

unknown plants, or even—”

“Don’t do it,” Eve said, cutting me off. “It’s the not the kind of place people come back from. I’m the strongest bloodsport gladiator in all of Monroy, and even I couldn’t stand the place for longer than a couple weeks. To be blunt, you wouldn’t last three days.”

I looked down at my water and smiled, feeling grateful.

“You would worry about my safety, I see. Thank you for your concern.”

Eve looked somewhat surprised. Leopard faces can be expressive too, in their own way.

“Hmph.” She sighed, defeated. “You don’t seem like a bad sort.”

“I get that a lot,” I said, scratching my head in embarrassment. People often thought I was a good person...at least after my foster parents took me in.

“Young, too. Your life’s important. Don’t throw it away.” Eve slid the silver piece I’d placed in front of her back over to my side. “Might not sound all that convincing coming from some reckless bloodsport gladiator, eh?” Then she walked out of the tavern without saying another word, leaving me staring after her.

...She reminds me of *him*.

“Misura,” I called to Seras, who’d been listening in behind us the whole time. “Let’s go.”

“Understood,” she replied.

Once we’d gotten a little distance from the tavern, I could ask about what was really on my mind—whether or not Eve was telling the truth.

“So, what did you think about that conversation?” I asked Seras.

“She wasn’t being honest with you,” she said.

When I asked if Eve knew where the Forbidden Witch really was, she had said that she didn’t. Seras could sense that it was a lie.

“By denying it, she actually ended up confirming it,” I said.

This means that...

“Eve Speed knows where the Forbidden Witch is.”

Seras and I returned to our inn.

“Squee~! ♪♪” Piggymaru came squelching out from under the bed.

“Oh no...”

“What is it, Sir Too-ka?” asked Seras, hanging her sword up on the wall.

With all that talk of curses, leopardman bloodsport gladiators, and the Forbidden Witch, I’d been so busy I completely forgot.

“I didn’t bring back any food for Piggymaru.”

“Squee.”

The little slime swung left and right, like it was shaking its head to say “Don’t worry about me!”

I stroked my jaw.

“It’s been a while, but I could always use *that*...”

“A leather pouch...?”

Seras watched curiously as I took the leather pouch out of my backpack and poured mana into the crystal. It began to glow faintly.

“If you had any lingering doubts whether I’m really from another world, this’ll probably end them.”

“Sque-sque-squee~! ♪♪”

Piggymaru finished eating and turned a light shade of pink. This time, the pouch had produced a cheese tart. I gave half to Piggymaru, and at his request, Seras and I split the other half.

This slime is surprisingly considerate...

“Some kind of baked, hard dough... Is this cheese on top?” asked Seras, sniffing at it.

They must not have cheese tarts in this world...

Seras cautiously bit into her tart. I did the same. The base was like a cookie, just firm enough to support the tart. The cheese was sweet, thick, and strong, with a faintly lemony aftertaste. The flavors and textures blended in my mouth.

“Careful not to get crumbs on the bed...oops.”

Piggymaru can always clean them up later, I guess.

Seras finished eating, her eyes beaming.

“That was...delicious,” she said. “Sir Too-ka!” She knelt on the bed and leaned towards me in excitement. “What was that thing? Is it a common food in your world?”

“It is, yeah.”

Man, she’s really leaning towards me. It feels like she’s going to push me over!

Seras seemed to realize this too and quickly pulled back. She cleared her throat, elegantly rearranging her sleeves and fixing her posture.

“M-my apologies.”

“You liked it, huh?”

“Yes...I’ve never had anything like it!”

“I’d love to get you more, but I can’t choose what this pouch gives out. I have no idea what’s going to show up next, and it takes a while to recharge after it’s been used,” I explained.

Seras took the leather pouch and turned it over in her hands.

“The equipment of a Hero from Another World, I take it?”

So she knows about our unique items too.

“Without this thing, I would never have survived the Ruins of Disposal. There was no food or water down there at all.”

“I have never heard of a piece of equipment like this before. My understanding was that hero equipment is usually some type of armor that increases the wearer’s abilities.”

Seras picked up the plastic wrapper that the cheese tart came in and inspected it thoroughly.

“This bag is transparent! And these are letters of some kind, I take it? What is this substance made of? How is it created?”

“In my world, we have the technology to make stuff like this. There are factories that do it though; I can’t make it myself.”

“I see... *Fac-to-ries*,” she said, sounding out the word like she’d

never heard it before. She continued studying the plastic intently.

“Sir Too-ka.”

“Hm?”

“It’s beautiful.”

She thinks plastic is beautiful? I think high elves take first prize for beauty.

“Maybe it’s because it’s not of this world that it looks so beautiful to you,” I said. But even as I said it, I knew that wasn’t always true—it wasn’t Seras’s otherworldly qualities that made her so beautiful to me.

I sat down on the bed with Piggymaru in my arms.

“Let’s consider what to do next, shall we?” said Seras.

We need to know where the Forbidden Witch is—even a rough location would help. Without it, we’re looking for a needle in a haystack.

“If only there was some way to get more information out of that bloodsport gladiator...” I said.

My skills aren’t going to be any use this time. Could I put Eve Speed to sleep and then hypnotize her into giving me the witch’s location? Is that even possible? And she seems like a good person. I don’t want to hurt her.

“This would all be easier if she was a terrible person like that foul Goddess Vicius,” I said.

“For now, shall we just set out to gather information about Eve Speed?” said Seras. “It might be easier to decide on a course of action once we know why she became a bloodsport gladiator in the first place. People fight in the colosseum for many reasons. Some are in it for the money, while others hope to join a mercenary group upon leaving the colosseum. There are also slaves attempting to buy their freedom through their victories.”

“So depending on why Eve’s there, she might be willing to make a trade for the information.”

We need to know where the witch is, but I also don’t want to stay in Monroy for too long.

“Seras...I have a question.”

“Of course.”

“What is it that bloodsport gladiators value most, after their

lives?” I asked.

Something they risk their lives to try to obtain.

“For most, I think it’s money, either for their own needs or to get out of the colosseum by buying their freedom from their owners.”

That explains why so many slaves volunteer to fight, hoping against hope to someday win their lives back. That’s a powerful motivation to keep fighting even when things get tough—and to put on a show for the audience. And the owners get paid either way.

“Yet I believe that a slave’s freedom costs a huge amount of money,” Seras continued.

“A huge amount of money, huh?”

I slipped my hand into my bag and gripped the small pouch of blue dragonstones.

If I ever do need a huge amount of money, I have the perfect items to trade right here.

SERAS ASHRAIN

“HUP!”

Seras lifted the basket of dirty clothes and made her way downstairs to the inn’s washroom—a small shed with a sheltered outdoor area in the back. Looking around, she only saw bedding hanging to dry.

They must ask patrons to dry their clothes in their own rooms.

Settling in at the laundry tub, she began to take the clothes of the basket, quickly going through her own items. She reached out towards the remaining clothes and hesitated.

Those are Sir Too-ka’s...

She was overtaken by a strange instinct, and before she even realized what she was doing, she found herself lifting one of Too-ka’s shirts to her face. Seras inhaled deeply.

She closed her eyes, envisioning her master, her heart calling his name.

“Sir Too-ka...”

It was a strange, new feeling to her—waves of calm washed over her whole body, and it felt as if a part of him had become a part of her.

Just his scent is enough to make me think of him...

The strange, confusing feeling lingered in her chest. She opened her eyes.

No. It can't be...

She quickly dropped Too-ka's shirt back in the basket. Her cheeks grew hot and her heart pounded.

...What was I doing?

She looked anxiously around the laundry area.

Nobody saw me, did they...?

She was alone. Relief spread through her whole body, her shoulders relaxing as the tension faded. With her hand pressed to her mouth, she stayed frozen in place, thinking.

Why did I...?

She couldn't understand her own behavior. It was as if she'd been compelled to sniff his clothes—been drawn in by them.

I may have some affection for him, but that was simply...

It was too embarrassing for her to contemplate. Her stomach twisted with regret.

How unfair of me to do this. It's despicable...

“Hey, are you okay?”

Seras jumped in shock and spun around.

“Hyaah! I-I'm sorry!”

“...What are you apologizing for?”

Too-ka was standing in the entrance to the laundry room. Seras's heart beat even faster than before.

When did he...? Sir Too-ka?! When did he come in? Seras's thoughts raced, confused and disjointed. Her ears were burning.

“Excuse me, I-I didn't realize you had come in... I was just startled,” she said, turning back to the washing.

“Sorry about that.”

“Ah, no I... I just... When did you come in?” She was grateful that he couldn’t see her face—she wouldn’t have been able to look him in the eyes now.

“Just a second ago. You seemed kind of frozen in place. You okay? Was there a bug in here or something?”

“Y-yes, there was.”

“Well, no need to get into details,” Too-ka said, shrugging.

Judging by his reaction, he saw through my lie just now. He’s just being kind by not pursuing it any further.

“I-Is there anything I can do for you...?”

“My clothes were gone. I just came to check, is all.”

“Ah! I’m so sorry, I thought I’d wash them with my own, but I forgot to ask your permission before—”

“Oh, that’s fine. You don’t mind doing them for me?”

“No, think nothing of it. I have to wash my own, and I have such a debt to you.”

“I’m used to washing my own clothes too. Maybe we should take turns. Oh, but you don’t want a guy touching your clothes, do you? We should probably do this stuff separately.”

Seras had almost called him Sir Too-ka by mistake, but stopped herself—the two of them were hardly alone at the inn, and Too-ka hadn’t called her Seras yet, either.

“If it’s you washing them, I wouldn’t mind.”

“Really? Okay, I’ll do the laundry next time, to keep things fair.”

Doubts formed in her mind.

Does he not think anything of handling my clothes? Will he not give in to some careless desire as I did? Seras was in awe of how much self-control her master showed.

“Excuse me, do you mind if I ask you something?” said Seras.

“What’s up?”

“Are you good at controlling yourself?”

“What do you mean...?”

“Ah... *Ahem*, I just meant...”

Seras hesitated, unsure of what to say next. Too-ka stroked his chin and looked thoughtful.

“Yeah...I think I’m actually really good at it right now.” Too-ka’s lips curled into a smile, his teeth bared aggressively. “All I’m focused on right now is revenge. I don’t have time to think about anything else—it’s like there’s a curse on me.”

“A curse...”

“Once I’ve gotten my revenge, I think I’ll have space in my head to think about other things. Until then, though...I’m cursed.”

“That curse, I...” Seras hesitated, hugging her master’s clothes to her chest. “I will do everything in my power to lift it.”

Too-ka exhaled loudly.

“Sure, I’m counting on you,” he said.

Dizzy with embarrassment and joy, Seras smiled at him.

“Yes, Master.”

MIMORI TOUKA

SERAS SUMMONED her spirit armor in our room. No matter how many times I saw it, watching her always made me think of one of those magical girl transformation scenes.

“The armor can dull my senses,” Seras explained. “I need to practice moving and reacting quickly.”

The room was closed tight. The window was shut, the curtains drawn, the door locked...

It’s getting kinda stuffy in here. At least the rooms on either side of ours are empty, and Piggymaru can let us know if anyone gets too close. It’s secure enough that Seras doesn’t need to be scared that her true identity will be revealed.

Seras drew her sword and began her practice swings. Maybe “practice swing” was the wrong word for it—Seras’s movements looked more like dancing than anything else. Seras looked deadly serious, but

her swordplay was beautiful, slicing down imaginary foes as they came at her, varying her speed to some internal rhythm. Her long hair and the cloth at her belt unfurled behind her.

I folded my arms and leaned back against the wall to watch.



I shouldn't call out to her now. Don't want to get in the way.

She grunted, and her sword sliced through the air like she was fighting an invisible enemy. All her movements felt weirdly real—it didn't look at all like she was just practicing.

"Hm?"

Piggymaru sat between my feet, swaying from right to left in time with Seras's swings.

"Sque, sque, squee!"

So Piggymaru's training too, huh?

Seras's movements were flawless. Beautiful. I couldn't blame anyone for falling in love with the way she danced across the room.

I don't know much about this stuff, but the way she uses space is impressive.

Our room was quite big, but she used every last bit of it. Even as sweat formed on her pale skin, her concentration never wavered.

I can understand why Civit thought of her as a potential rival now. There's a gap between us that stat points just can't bridge. Her experience and skill in battle—I don't have any of that.

Despite how warm the room had become, I could feel the heat pouring off of Seras's body as her training came to an end.

"Here," I said, offering her a cloth.

"Ah, thank you."

Her fair neck was flushed pink as she wiped down the glimmering layer of sweat that had formed there. Her breathing slowly returned to normal.

"Can't you lower the temperature in here with that ice spirit?" I asked.

Seras laughed.

"I could if I wanted to, I suppose."

"I was just wondering, not being serious." The power of the spirits was best left as a last resort—not only did Seras sacrifice sleep just to use it, it also put a strain on her body.

"Are you done training for the day?"

“Yes. I simply wanted to confirm that I could still move as I usually do.”

“So...is there a trick to this fighting stuff?”

“Are you interested in learning?” asked Seras, catching what I’d meant by the question.

“I’d need to make training a part of my daily routine, though. Wouldn’t I?”

“You would, yes. It’s not something you can learn overnight.”

Given my stats, training for combat would be an uphill battle.

“I don’t want to rely too much on my skills. If worse comes to worst, I might need to be able to fight.”

“I understand.” Seras set the cloth down on the bed. “First, perhaps...you should learn how to hold your weapon and distribute your weight when fighting,” she said, walking towards me. She gave me a small smile. “I...I used to train others like this when I was captain of the Band of the Holy Knights. It came right back to me.”

She suddenly looked like a warrior, the hardened expression of a holy knight on her face.

“Well then...” She lined her feet up with mine and stood facing me. “Come for me.”

I hesitated. “All right.”

She’s probably going to teach me how to dodge or something.

“Ah,” she said, sounding flustered, “I simply meant for you to try to violently push me to the ground, that’s all. I didn’t mean...”

“You don’t need to clarify, I get it. Okay, here goes.”

“V-very well, whenever you are ready.”

Seras’s expression hardened once more.

Wow, I’m intimidated just looking at her. So this is what she looks like when she’s facing off against an enemy.

“Please come at me with all your strength. If you succeed, I fully expect that it will hurt, but please don’t hold back. Try to hit my left cheek,” she said, squaring off against me.

I nodded once, secured my footing, then launched myself at Seras. I twisted my hips and swung my fist towards her—not strong, but fast.

This might hurt a little if it lands. I really don't want to, but—

Smack! Grab!

“Huh...?!”

My fist was twisted up behind my back in an instant. Seras was now standing behind me, and there was a dull pain radiating from my neck into to my shoulders.

“This is the most efficient way to shut down your enemy's ability to attack,” she said.

“...Amazing.”

“If you wanted to go further, you could do this.”

“Nh, Ghh!”

Seras pushed her body against mine, drawing my other arm behind my back as well. The pain grew worse, with intense twisting and pressure on both my arms. I tried to move them, or escape, but it was no use.

“I can't get free.”

“Yes, that's the intended result.”

Strangely, my legs wouldn't do what I asked them to, either.

This technique seems good for disabling an opponent without hurting them. Is this a martial art?

Seras's breathing was slow, deep, and even.

“This move doesn't require weapons and doesn't seriously harm your opponent,” she explained. Some of the warmth had returned to her voice.

I see...

“No matter how high my stats get, they won't matter if I can't do this.”

“You will need to train hard and review often, but I believe I can teach you how to use your hands and feet properly over the next few days so—!”

Seras abruptly released her hold and jumped away from me.

“I'm sorry—I'm covered in sweat. I shouldn't have gotten so close to you,” she said, her voice growing quieter. “I probably smell

unpleasant...”

Seras had never smelled strongly of sweat to me.

I...don't dislike her smell, anyway...

“If you don’t want to get too close, just explain it to me.”

“S-Sir Too-ka, Y-you don’t mind if we do more practical exercises...? As we just did?”

“I don’t mind, no. It’s just sweat—seems like it’s part of training. It doesn’t bother me. Does it bother you?”

I don't want Seras to be uncomfortable with what we're doing.

“I-It doesn’t bother me at all...”

“Then that’s settled. Do you mind if we continue?”

I'm getting to learn the basics of martial arts for free... This is a great opportunity, and I have to make the best of it.

Seras nodded. “Well then, let us proceed.”

Seras was sleeping peacefully on the bed, her chest rising and falling steadily. I had cast my Sleep skill on her to send her off. The spirits that provided her armor took her ability to sleep normally as payment for their contract, but she was tired tonight and agreed to let me help.

It’s good that I can help her get some rest like this, but...she really doesn’t have any objections to my putting her to sleep, does she? And she knows that until it wears off, only I can wake the targets of my Sleep skill no matter what anybody does to them. That gladiator said I don’t seem like a bad sort too.

“Nhh...”

I watched as Seras rolled over in her sleep.

“I’m not a good person...she is,” I whispered to myself.

When I thought about what a good person is supposed to be, the first person who came to my mind was my foster mother. Next...some of my classmates, I supposed, Kashima Kobato and Sogou Ayaka.

I wonder what they're doing right now...

I couldn’t sleep, but the night was still young. I sat on the floor

and set up a small work area with a lamp, some equipment, and *Forbidden Arts: The Complete Works*. In addition to everything else it held, the book had directions for creating forbidden tools—items made with forbidden magic—some of which looked like they’d be very useful. Seras’s blankets rustled behind me as I set about my work.

Ah... The Sleep effect must’ve already worn off.

“You’re still awake, Sir Too-ka?” Seras asked quietly.

“Sorry, was I making too much noise?”

“No, you didn’t wake me. I—”

Seras hesitated.

Ah, I see.

I looked over my shoulder at her.

“You don’t need to say it.”

Only partially covered with the blanket, Seras was lightly dressed, to put it politely. The soft light of the lamp gently illuminated her body, the jacket she had won yesterday crumpled up by her bare thighs. I turned back to my book.

“I’d put on more clothes in case someone sees you out there. And don’t forget to disguise your face before you go.”

“Ah, yes...I’ll be careful.”

I heard Seras hurriedly getting dressed behind me. I must have embarrassed her when I implied she was showing a little too much skin.

“I think we should’ve gotten separate rooms after all,” I said, turning the page.

“I’m the one who suggested we sleep in the same room. I had expected... Well, I understood that unavoidable accidents like this might occur. And, well...that was embarrassing, but it was brought about by a lack of proper attention to detail on my part.”

Seras disguised her face and then, for some reason, bowed briefly to me before leaving the room. I heard her footsteps slowly getting quieter as she walked down the hallway. Before long, the room was silent again—even Piggymaru wasn’t making any noise. Only the sound of turning pages remained.

“...”

Quiet nights like these made me feel calm, somehow. They used to make me so uneasy when I was a kid—I didn't stop being afraid of the dark until I went to live with my foster parents. I figured Seras was in the same boat—living on the run, afraid of being caught while she slept. Unlike me, though, her name and face were so widely known... She was more like some famous singer or celebrity trying to hide from the public.

I looked over at the bed, and at the blankets that Seras had tossed aside as she woke up.

At least now she's getting more sleep than she did on the road.

"The Lord of the Flies and the Princess Knight, huh?"

Master and servant.

There's a hierarchy—no need for me to pressure her. It's the opposite. A master's supposed to make you feel safe and secure and inspire you to do better. Mimori Touka has to play the lead, but that's fine—he's good at acting.

I stopped turning the pages.

I get the feeling that Seras is acting out a role as well. Trying to be my faithful sword, playing the servant as best she can. But I can tell she's hiding something, pushing back her true feelings.

I stared over at the empty bed.

"Thank you. For everything you're doing—for keeping your emotions, whatever they are, under control," I said to the empty space.

I turned back to my book.

"Sir Too-ka, aren't you going to sleep tonight?" Seras asked when she came back.

"Huh?"

She cleared her throat like she was trying to get my attention, but I didn't look up from the book.

"You've explained the importance of sleep to me many times, have you not? I can't abide you not getting enough yourself."

I turned another page, still looking for the forbidden tools I'd noticed before.

“When I feel like I need to sleep, I’ll sleep... Nothing good comes of not getting enough, no matter what animal you are.”

There was really no downside to getting a full night. It was always the right choice. I massaged the bridge of my nose.

“Still, there are some nights I just can’t get any rest at all,” I said.

“I understand,” replied Seras, nodding in agreement. She went over to her things and started rummaging around for something. A minute later, she came back over and knelt next to me. She laid out several small bottles, each engraved with a leaf in the center. She opened one and poured its contents into her palm.

“These are medicinal leaves.”

“Any good for getting to sleep?”

“Heh, that’s right.”

“Looks like you have a couple kinds—some of the leaves are different colors,” I noted.

Seras picked up one of the other bottles. “Yes. These ones look a little similar but the effect is the opposite. They give you more energy, like a pick-me-up.”

Medicinal herbs, huh.

“Hang on, I’ve got just the thing to mix them with.”

I retrieved a packet of powdered soup from my backpack. I’d gotten it from my leather pouch, but since it wouldn’t go bad, I’d held on to it.

“I’ll be right back,” I said.

I went downstairs and got some hot water and a couple bowls, which I brought back to the room. Then I completed the familiar ritual of making instant soup.

Seras swallowed audibly. “It smells delicious.”

“It’s simple but great, this stuff.”

Oh man, that smell’s making me hungry... Seras looks really excited about this too.

“Want to try some before I put the herbs in?”

“May I?”

Seras took a delicate sip. She reacted with astonishment, repeating over and over how delicious the soup was.

“It’s perfect!”

“Perfect, huh?”

She nodded vigorously as she picked up the soup packet and turned it over in her hands curiously.

“Simply placing this powder into water has turned it to soup... This would be an incredibly useful food for travelers, or for soldiers in times of war.”

“Do you mind giving me some of those herbs now?”

“Ah! Of course, here they are.”

“Do you want me to do it?”

“No, no, allow me.”

Seras shook a few herbs from the bottle over each bowl.

“Oh no!”

“...”

She’d shaken a little too hard, and now one of the bowls was almost covered in little green leaves.

“...Want me to drink the one with too many herbs in it?” I asked.

“No, I’ll drink it. I made the mistake, after all.”

“All right.”

I cautiously sipped the soup.

This has a kick to it...a little like sansho pepper maybe?

“Mine tastes a little strong because I put too much in here, but this is really quite relaxing, isn’t it?” said Seras.

I drained the rest of my soup.

“Relaxing?” I asked.

Didn’t taste relaxing to me.

“You didn’t think so, Sir Too-ka? These medicinal herbs tend to... Hm—?!”

Seras turned pale and suddenly grabbed the bottles, looking between them.

Don't tell me...

"...You mixed up the bottles?"

"Yes."

Even for Seras, this mistake is just too cliché. I guess she was so flustered after the first bowl went wrong that she wasn't concentrating on the bottles when she made the second.

"S-Sir Too-ka..."

She looked over at me anxiously, one hand resting on her chest, looking too sorry and remorseful for words.

"I...I'm so sorry. I wanted to help you sleep, but those herbs will do the opposite."

"It's fine. I'll get some more reading done tonight, that's all."

I can use Forbidden Arts: The Complete Works as my excuse and put on a brave face. I feel totally on edge and almost sick—my whole body is too hot and my pulse is racing. There's no way I'm getting any sleep tonight.

"If you can't sleep, is there anything I can do for you instead?" she asked.

Does she really understand what she's offering? But still, there's nothing she can do.

"Go to sleep. We're gathering intel tomorrow."

"But Sir Too-ka..."

"I'll sleep when I'm tired. Go on, or I'll use Sleep on you again."

Seras nodded and dutifully got back into bed, settling herself on her back.

"I really am sorry about my mistake. Is there truly nothing I can do for you?" she asked, looking at me.

"It's fine. Just go to sleep."

"Okay."

I cast Sleep on her, and she immediately fell into a deep sleep. Apparently, the rule about not applying a status effect to the same target twice wasn't as hard and fast as I first expected—effects could be reapplied after a cooldown. Back in the Ruins of Disposal, I tried to immediately reapply my skills to the same target—that must be why it hadn't worked.

After I put Seras to sleep, I turned back to *Forbidden Arts: The Complete Works*.

“Squee~!”

Piggymaru came crawling out from the far corner of the room. The slime did a little jump and landed on my shoulder.

“Hm? You can’t sleep either?”

I don’t even know if slimes can sleep.

“I wonder when I’ll be able to get some rest...”

Not like I can’t handle staying up all night, though. I gave up on the book and stared at the ceiling. I wasn’t going to make any forbidden tools tonight.

“My foster dad always used to say, ‘You can only push yourself like this when you’re young.’”

“Squee~!”

“How old are you, anyway?”

“Squee?”

“Huh, guess you don’t know, do you?”

“Squee.”

“Nnh.”

Piggymaru jumped on me, changing shape as he did, and began massaging my head, shoulders, and back.

This feels pretty good... I feel like all that tension’s just floating away.

“Piggymaru, you... You’re so dependable... What a good slime...”

“Squee~! ♪♪”

Before long, I was sleeping as soundly as Seras.

The next morning...

“I’m finished changing, Sir Too-ka.”

“Okay. Let’s go, then.” I patted Piggymaru on my way out. “Look after the room while we’re gone, little buddy.”

“Squee!”

After a quick breakfast at the inn, we decided to head to the

Bloodsport Colosseum to gather intel on Eve Speed.

“Hm? What’s up?” I asked Seras.

Her shoulders sank as she walked, as if she was upset with herself.

“I’m sorry I eat so slowly,” she said.

“Don’t worry about it. How’d you sleep?” I asked as we walked.

“I woke up three hours after you sent me to sleep,” Seras replied. That seemed to be the maximum duration of my leveled-up Sleep skill.

“After that you stayed awake until morning?”

“Yes. I must honor my agreement with the spirits, but I feel much better than usual.”

Seras did look and sound much healthier today. She couldn’t sleep properly at all while she was on the run. It must’ve been a relief that my Sleep skill let her get some rest now, though it did feel a bit like cheating.

“You were really exhausted in the Mills Ruins.”

“I-I apologize if I caused you any concern.”

“Still, it’s amazing you were able to even move around in that state. Testament to your abilities as a warrior, isn’t it?”

Seras gave me a wry smile.

“Compliments from my master, hmm?”

“I like a carrot better than a stick.”

We finally arrived at the colosseum, a great arena just off the main road. There was a map posted outside, obviously for the benefit of tourists, that showed a basic overview of the area. There was a field in the center of the colosseum, surrounded by cascading rings of seats for spectators.

I guess this shape makes sense no matter what world you’re living in.

The area outside the colosseum was busy—Seras hadn’t been exaggerating about how popular the fights were—and the screams of the crowd could be heard from within.

There’s a fight going on now.

“What should we do? If Eve Speed’s fighting today, we should—” I started.

“Eve Speed isn’t fighting today,” said Seras, leaning in to look at a poster.

“Oh, okay.”

Not like watching her fight would actually tell us anything helpful anyway...

“Let’s see what we can learn about her from the people around here. No internet to make things convenient for us.”

At least I have Seras around to tell me things.

“What’s an internet?” asked Seras.

“Hm? Oh, in my world, we have these devices that let us find information from anywhere in the world. Some confidential stuff you can’t find, I guess, but not much.”

“Like a library that anybody can go into?”

“It’s a little different from that.”

“But you can’t use it while you’re here?”

My phone didn’t even turn on when I tried it.

“No,” I said, “so I guess we’ll have to resort to old-fashioned methods.” I gestured at the people milling around the food stalls that were set up outside the colosseum. “Let’s get some intel.”

I can pretend to be some country kid, new to the city and fascinated by leoparden.

“Should we split up?” asked Seras.

“Sure. We’ll get it done in half the time.”

I tossed Seras a pouch with half our coin in it.

“Use that if you need to—some people will start talking if you buy them something nice to eat.”

“Are you sure...?” asked Seras.

“It’s just the cost of doing business, isn’t it?” My foster father used to say that sometimes you have to spend money to make money...that was pretty much all I knew about business.

Seras and I went our separate ways to see what we could find out, then met up in front of the colosseum several hours later.

“I couldn’t see you for a while there,” I said.

“I actually extended my search to another area,” said Seras.

“So, how’d it go?”

“As you’d expect of a popular bloodsport gladiator, discussion of Eve Speed makes almost anyone talkative.”

I’d found the same thing—it was easy to find information about her, and people were only too happy to play at being experts, eager to impart their knowledge to a rube.

We sat on the ground as we went over what we’d learned from our sources. Eve was sold as a slave to the Bloodsport Colosseum by traders. The crowds were apparently getting bored of the fights back then, and management thought that maybe an exotic leopardman would get them excited again. They were right—Eve was a crowd-pleaser from her very first fight, and it wasn’t long before the Bloodsport Colosseum was more popular than ever.

“She hasn’t lost a single match in three years. Impressive, right?” I said.

“I heard that after her first six months, she was barred from competing in group combat as her side would always win.”

“So she’s personally strong enough to be the deciding factor in group combat. She has a lot of supporters too. I couldn’t find anyone who would bet against her,” I said. “It seems like the same fighter winning all the time should get boring, but for some reason she’s an exception.”

“She always tries to make her fights a show and give the audience the kind of victories they want. She’s very entertaining, apparently—the people I spoke with said they enjoy watching her win even when her victory is expected.”

That explains why she’s so popular.

“Did you hear that tomorrow’s supposed to be her last fight?” I asked.

Seras nodded. “I did.”

“That must mean she’s earned enough money to buy her freedom, right? She doesn’t look like the type who cares much for money—I don’t know if we can get her to tell us the witch’s location without something more to offer.”

“I found something else,” said Seras, moving in closer to me and lowering her voice. “She has already earned enough to buy her freedom—over a year ago, in fact.”

“What, so she’s spent the time since then just saving up for when she eventually gets out?”

“No, I don’t believe so,” replied Seras.

“What do you mean?”

“She is attempting to buy her own freedom...and the freedom of another slave.”

“I guess that’d take longer to save up for, huh? I don’t suppose you know who she’s trying to free.”

Seras took out a scrap of paper and handed it to me. Unfolding it, I found a name and short description written inside.

“A kid?”

“This girl was sold on the Monroy slave market at around the same time as Eve herself.”

“Her daughter, maybe?”

“No, the girl isn’t a leopardman.”

“Hmm.”

This sounds complicated.

I remembered my conversation with Eve about the Forbidden Witch. She was straightforward with me, but surprisingly stubborn in her refusal to give details. Did she owe the witch a favor? The only way to overcome that would be if Eve owed me a bigger one.

“I don’t think this is a situation we can resolve with coin,” I said, thinking out loud. “What can we use as leverage?”

Not the money to buy her freedom, or freedom for that kid, since Eve already has it on hand. Should we forget about her and go straight to the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters? Maybe we could hire Eve as protection once she has her freedom?

“There’s something else you should know,” said Seras.

“First, do you mind if I ask how you found all this out?” I didn’t even have half of the information she did.

She hesitated before answering me. “I...used an informant.”

“An informant?”

“There weren’t any in Mils, but large cities like Monroy have informant networks that trade in information like this,” she explained.

Oh, so that’s why she extended her search. I’m lucky she knows about all this stuff. She used to be a knight—maybe she used these informant networks all the time for work.

“The princess told me of these dark places when I was still by her side at the palace. She used the people of that underworld to protect herself at court. You could find people you could hire to do the work that others couldn’t. I’m sorry for going to an informant without your permission, but they’re not welcoming to newcomers, you see.”

“I told you to investigate on your own, didn’t I? Don’t worry about. But how do the informants know if the network’s familiar with you or not?”

I was purely curious about how this worked.

“I understand the manners that are required. Only the network and their customers are aware of them, and so can prove their affiliation. Informants can always see right through someone who isn’t familiar with their ways.”

Some kind of symbol or sign, maybe? A secret handshake? Sounds like they really value their secrecy. I wouldn’t have wanted to make them nervous by walking in there with Seras, anyway.

“But I should have informed you that I planned on using an informant at the very least. I’m sorry. Oh, and...”

Seras held out the now-empty coin pouch, her hand trembling.

“I ended up using all the money you gave me to acquire the information. I...I made the mistake of trying to negotiate with them.”

“That’s fine. We got the info we needed, didn’t we? I should be thanking you.”

Seras breathed a sigh of relief.

“My master is kind, as always.”

I’m not. But why would I get mad at her for getting the information I’d asked for?

“So what did you want to tell me, anyway?”

“Ah of course,” started Seras. She lowered her voice, and her expression grew serious. “Did you hear about the other bloodsport gladiators? Many of the strongest are killed in their last fight.”

“Yeah, I picked up on that.”

It was so common for bloodsport gladiators to die in their final fight that they often drew an even larger crowd than usual—people morbidly curious to see how things ended.

“You think their opponents are extra aggressive with them? Like, one last chance to beat the champion?” I suggested. An extremely low survival rate...that almost reminded me of the Ruins of Disposal.

“It appears the explanation is simpler than that,” replied Seras.

She looked around, making sure none of the passing people were near us, then leaned, in bringing her mouth almost to my ear.

“The Bloodsport Colosseum management—the baron—puts them at a disadvantage on their final day in the ring.”

Some people might call that cowardly—stepping all over the hopes and dreams of the warriors who stake their lives in pursuit of them. But I...I saw the reasoning behind it and the opportunity it provided.

I was a terrible person—I learned that more and more each day.

Seras was still talking. “I fail to understand why management would engage in such cheap tricks to interfere with a gladiator’s shining moment,” she said.

So a popular bloodsport gladiator wins their final fight, earns their freedom, and leaves to live happily ever after. What about the crowds they leave behind?

“Once the most popular fighter is out of the picture, management needs a someone to step in to replace them. So think about it—what’s the most effective way to turn someone into a star?”

“Oh!”

It appeared Seras had found the answer.

“Yeah. Whoever kills the former champion gets a fast track to popularity—or at least notoriety.”

It was like the ultimate passing of the torch—a great way for management to ensure a steady supply of favorites.

“If Eve wasn’t such a crowd-pleaser, they might just let her win and buy her freedom. They have to let people, sometimes, to show that escape isn’t impossible and to keep the illusion of hope alive. But Eve Speed is the undefeated, wildly popular champion. To create a worthy successor...” I trailed off.

“You think they will try to kill her in her last combat to do so,” said Seras.

“Yeah.”

Seras didn’t look entirely convinced.

“But everybody who goes to the colosseum loves her, don’t they? They come to see her succeed. Wouldn’t they be happy to see her finally win her freedom?”

That says a lot about how Seras sees people, huh?

“Sorry, but that’s probably not how this works.”

“Wh-what do you mean?”

“Celebrity is the same in all worlds, I think. The crowds don’t love Eve Speed because of who she is as a person, only for what she gives them. Without her status as a winning bloodsport gladiator, she’s nothing to them. They only care about the performance—the fight.”

“I-I see... You’re likely correct about the people who attend these events.”

“Well, that’s not what’s really important, anyway,” I said, taking a step back from Seras, who had leaned in so close that we were almost touching. “The management, the baron or whoever, is definitely going to try to kill Eve Speed in tomorrow’s fight.”

“So your intention is for us to go in tomorrow and hold off her attackers?” asked Seras.

She looks excited by the idea—she probably empathizes with Eve.

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Hm?”

I looked up at the Bloodsport Colosseum towering over us.

“I don’t think there’s any reason to wait for tomorrow.”

Chapter 2: The Leopardman and the Young Girl

AS THE SUN BEGAN to set, we saw the leopardman emerge from the colosseum. I looked down at my pocket watch—right on time. The information I'd gathered wasn't as comprehensive as what Seras had learned from her informants, but it was still useful. Word was that Eve Speed often left the colosseum around this time.

The question was if, on the night before her big day, she'd want to be out walking around the city. It looked like I didn't need to worry about that. Perks of being the strongest warrior around, eh?

Eve didn't turn towards the main street. Instead, she headed into one of the sketchier neighborhoods. She tucked into a dark alleyway and I slipped in after her, only to find her stopped, her back towards me, hand on her sword.

"What do you want?" she asked without turning to face me.

She caught on that I was tailing her—should've expected as much. I guess I can do it here.

Eve slowly turned towards me.

"So...it's you," she said.

"I wanted to talk with you, Miss Eve. Could I have a moment of your time?"

"I already told you that those rumors about me and the Forbidden Witch aren't true."

"Yeah, but...you were lying, weren't you?"

"...You've got some nerve."

"Do you owe something to the witch?"

"No."

Seras took a step forward, revealing herself.

"That was a lie," she said, but Eve didn't respond.

"I see. So you owe her some kind of favor, then?"

Eve's eyes narrowed, and she studied us with obvious suspicion.

“Who are you?” she finally asked.

“Let’s both stop trying to deceive each other, shall we, Eve Speed?” I said, trying to give an impression of kindness.

“...I’m not trying to deceive you. I told you the truth,” said Eve.

“That too was a lie,” said Seras.

Eve looked at her. “How can you say that? You don’t know anything about me.”

“I have my sources. In any case, I’m correct, am I not? You should know that just as well as I.”

Eve let out a low, beastly growl and tightened her grip on the sword hanging at her hip.

“Tell me what you want.”

“We want to help you,” I said.

A wave of surprise and disbelief swept across her face.

“*Help* me?”

“Tomorrow is your final fight, isn’t it?” I asked.

“It is...” she allowed.

“Colosseum management is planning something—they’re going to try to force you to lose the fight.”

“What did you just say?”

I quickly recapped the information that Seras and I had gathered.

Eve huffed. “Even if that’s true, why would you want to help me?”

“That’s simple. You know where the Forbidden Witch is, and we need to know where she is. Convincing you to help us is the best shot we have at finding her.”

Eve didn’t look convinced but knew she couldn’t lie to us—that she wouldn’t be able to talk her way out of this situation.

“Do you have any actual proof that the baron is plotting something?”

“Nothing definite,” I admitted.

“Hmm...” Eve made a thoughtful noise and then went quiet for a few moments, seemingly lost in thought.

“What is it?” I asked.

“I’m the property of Baron Zuan, and...well, I wouldn’t put it past him, to be honest.”

No trust between a slave owner and his slave, huh? That works in our favor.

“Couldn’t we kidnap that girl you came to Monroy with and escape the city with her?”

Eve growled fiercely. “You... If you hurt her, I—” she started.

“Don’t worry,” I cut in. “We have no intention of hurting her.”

“...”

“I just wanted to let you know that we understand your situation. You already have the money to buy your own freedom, and you’ve spent over a year earning enough for her as well.”

Eve’s grip on her sword loosened, her anger subsiding.

“Thanks for your concern, but whatever the baron might try tomorrow...I can hardly be seen running away from a fight.” Her eyes didn’t waver. “No matter what position they put me in, I’ll win tomorrow. I’ll win my freedom with my own hands.”

“Won’t you even consider running? If you tell us where the witch lives, we’ll even help you escape,” I said.

“Escape? To where?” Eve sounded exasperated. “Unless I follow the rules, properly buy both of us back from Baron Zuan, he’ll pursue us to the ends of the world. The management’ll put a bounty on our heads, and every mercenary on the continent will be out for our blood.”

There was sorrow in her eyes.

“I could live that kind of life, sure...but not the kid. I can’t force her to spend the rest of her days running from men she’ll never escape, always looking over her shoulder, never sure she’s safe. I can’t do it.”

But if you go into that ring, there’s a good chance you’re going to die anyway.

“What if I knew of a good place to hide?”

“...Go on.”

“I’m sure you could fill me in on the details yourself, though.” She looked confused. “You could hide where the Forbidden Witch lives.”

“...”

“You know where she is, don’t you? Why not hide there?”

“You’re suggesting I take you to her.”

“We would go with you. Help keep the girl safe.”

“Hmph.” Eve smirked at me and snorted. “Even if I did know where the witch is, reaching her is impossible.”

“Why?”

“Nobody can get to the center of the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters. I already told you—nobody gets out alive.”

“You might if we came with you. We would protect that girl with all our power. Don’t you even want to try?”

Eve’s eyes narrowed as she focused on Seras.

“That swordswoman behind you seems skilled enough, but I don’t sense any of that from you. You’re proposing that a swordswoman and I lead you and a child into that place? It’d be a suicide mission, even without civilians.”

Seras tried to speak, but I held up a hand to stop her.

“Despite how I look, I’m skilled in magic. I’ve taken down a skeleton king without even breaking a sweat.” It was the strongest, most well-known monster I could think of.

“A skeleton king, eh...? Fearsome thing for sure, but there are creatures that would eat you for breakfast in the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters.”

So they’re even stronger than skeleton kings...

“Then...” I prepared myself for the risk and pulled out another of my trump cards. “What if I told you that I’m the one who defeated the Black Dragon Knights?”

“What? *You* did that?”

“I’m not exactly broadcasting it—those Ashint guys going around claiming responsibility are providing a nice smokescreen for the time being.”

“Impossible,” Eve said sharply, “you aren’t capable of that.”

I held out my hand in her direction.

“Not sure if this will convince you, but—”

Eve tensed up, ready to react at any second.

Thump.

In an instant, Seras was between us.

Eve made a sound of surprise and turned her attention away from me for just a moment.

“Paralyze.”

“Nh, huh?! Wh-what? I can’t m-move...!”

“Don’t struggle. As a fun little bonus, you start bleeding if you try to force your way out of it.”

“I-It can’t be... Th-this is...a status...effect...?”

“A slightly unusual status effect skill, yeah... Pretty effective, don’t you think?”

“I-Impossible.”

“Well, it’s because of this impossible power that a weakling like me was able to kill Civit Gartland.”

“Ghh... Unh...”

“I already told you, don’t try to move. That’s a friendly warning, not a threat.

Here, I’ll make it easier for you to talk.”

I walked over to Eve and dispelled the effect, but only from her head.

“Huh? I can talk...?”

“I have other powerful status effect skills too. That’s how I killed the Elite Five. Want me to tell you how they died?”

“You really... You killed the Elite Five?” Eve said. Maybe she was starting to believe that I didn’t intend to hurt her—her tone was less aggressive now. Or maybe she just knew I had her at a disadvantage.

“Allow me to provide further proof,” said Seras, facing Eve. “I am the one they were pursuing—my name is Seras Ashrain.”

Eve’s ears stood up, like a cat listening for a mouse.

“You’re really Seras Ashrain?”

“This is my master, who saved me from the Black Dragon Knights.”

“Enough with this farce. The former Captain of the Band of the Holy Knights is an elf, and—”

Eve stopped midsentence, her eyes opening wide.

“Oh!”

Eve’s reaction made it clear that Seras had dispelled her disguise and revealed her true face.

“Do you understand now? I am using the power of the spirits to conceal my identity.”

Eve groaned. Internally, I groaned too. I hadn’t expected Seras to reveal her identity here.

Is she that sympathetic to Eve’s situation? She’s trying hard to save her.

“My master defeated the Elite Five. I watched him do it before my very eyes.”

Seras stepped back, prompting me to continue.

“Unless the creatures in the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters are stronger than Civit Gartland, I think we’ll be okay,” I said.

“...You do seem powerful, I’ll give you that,” said Eve.

“Believe me or don’t about the Elite Five—I know what it sounds like, and I can’t blame you for having doubts. I just wanted to show you what I’m capable of.”

Eve snorted at me.

“You’ve proved your point—not that it’s done you any good. I’m fighting tomorrow, no matter what. I’m not going back to the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters, either. This changes nothing.”

“Even if you win tomorrow, do you really think Baron Zuan will keep his promises?”

“What?”

“I heard he murdered a prostitute just because he didn’t like the way she looked. It’s mostly rumors, of course, but he’s hardly a saint, is he?”

After hearing the men in the tavern talking about him, I had done

some research on Baron Zuan. He wasn't a good man, to say the least. He was one of *them*—the terrible people, like the ones I'd known all my life. The garbage.

"I know how scumbags like that think," I said.

I'm one too, after all.

"Even if you win tomorrow...I don't think the baron is just going to let you have your freedom, no matter how much money you have."

Eve was quiet for a few moments, deep in thought but still watching me closely. I tried to tilt the scales a little bit.

"I heard this story, you know, about a bloodsport gladiator. He was like you—strongest in the colosseum, top of his game. He won his last fight, and the very next day they found his corpse floating in the river."

"A bloodsport gladiator dying after earning their freedom..." mused Eve, "I don't know the details, but I've heard the story. Went to a tavern celebrating his big victory and got into a fight with some mercenaries, didn't he? He was too drunk to hold his sword and got beaten to death in the brawl."

"That's the official story, yeah."

"Official story? What are you talking about?"

"You don't know about the girl he was in love with, do you?"

"First I'm hearing of it."

"There was a slave girl working in a little tavern he liked to visit. He wanted to buy her freedom—remind you of anyone? But something happened..."

"What happened?"

"I don't know. They didn't let him buy her back. The tavern he visited to celebrate wasn't even the one she worked at, I hear. The worst part, though, is what happened to the slave girl next."

"What... What happened to her?"

"After the man died, Baron Zuan bought her. She worked in his mansion for two years before he sold her to a brothel. Also, one of the mercenaries who beat the former champion to death was made a leader of the Mercenaries' Guild. Think his name was Gilmudd."

“Gilmudd? I’ve heard of him. Dead long before I came to the city though... Where did you hear all this?” asked Eve.

“In some dark places—interpret that however you like.”

“Mmh...” Eve appeared to understand what I was referring to.

“It’s not like I’ve heard all this from anywhere official, though. Maybe it’s all made up—the baron himself would probably deny it if you asked him.”

“You believe the baron and the guild arranged the gladiator’s death?” Eve asked.

“It sure sounds that way.”

“And...you believe I’m heading down the same path?”

I shrugged indifferently. “Maybe. So what will you do? Get the girl and escape with us, or take your chances in the colosseum?”

I looked her straight in the eyes.

“The choice is yours.”

“I...I choose to take my freedom—to earn it,” she replied.

So she’s chosen to fight tomorrow. I had a feeling she would.

“I’ll win tomorrow. I’ve always been rewarded for my victories—I’ve carved out a life for myself in that place. I can’t trust either of you. I can’t tell you where the Forbidden Witch lives, either.”

“My master is trying to save you!” Seras said frantically, unable to hold herself back.

Eve shook her head. “You appeared out of nowhere just yesterday—would *you* be so trusting of strangers? The world of the Bloodsport Colosseum is all I’ve known since I came to this city.”

Well, figures.

“I understand what you’re saying,” I replied, “but can you really trust Baron Zuan?”

“He’s not a good man, I’ll give you that. But he’s rewarded me so far for my victories. I’m sure he’ll give me a difficult fight to excite the crowd. But I’ve known him long enough—he isn’t as heartless as you say.”

That’s because he had more to gain from you. He’s been using you.

"I know the system of bloodsport combat—and I don't know you. There's no doubt in my mind which one I should trust," said Eve. "I've made a name for myself in the colosseum. I trust in that too."

Eve looked like she was done talking. The sides of my mouth curled into a wicked smile.

"Eve Speed..."

"What is it?"

"Why are you telling me this? Over and over...how much you trust the system."

"What do y—"

"Are you trying to convince me? Or yourself?"

"..."

I dispelled the paralysis effect, freeing her. "I'm done demonstrating my power. Sorry for bothering you. We'll pray for your victory in the fight tomorrow. Let's go, Seras," I said, turning to walk away.

"Y-yes, Master!"

Seras quickly followed me.

"Wait."

It was Eve.

"Why did you release me? You could have killed me—you had the upper hand. If you want to know where the Forbidden Witch is, why didn't you try to beat it out of me? I know your secrets now—why would you just let me go?"

I stopped. I didn't answer Eve's question—didn't need to.

"We're leaving Monroy at midnight," I said. "We'll be near the bridge outside the front gate. Meet us there if you change your mind."

With that, Seras and I turned and walked away without looking back.

"I'm so sorry," Seras said as we made our way back to the inn.

"Hm? What for?"

"I revealed my identity without consulting you. I made the

decision all on my own... I'm prepared for any punishment you might have for me."

Seras's expression was dark.

Wait...punishment?

"I didn't expect you to reveal yourself to Eve, but it ended up making us more convincing in the end, didn't it? Don't worry about it."

The way Eve reacted...she knows that Seras is the real deal.

"This time perhaps, but if I had interfered with or spoiled your plans, Master, I..."

"I'll decide if you've done something wrong," I said, interrupting her. "I don't care what happens as long as we get results. I'll blame you for your mistakes when you actually make one. Today, you helped. Everything worked out fine."

All the responsibility and obsessive rule following...it probably came from her time as a captain of the Holy Knights. Maybe I should've been stricter with her since we were master and servant. I made the rules in this two-member mercenary band of ours. and I was the one who decided where blame lies.

"I understand. If you say so, Master." The anxious expression faded from Seras's face. She stopped and bowed solemnly to me. "Thank you for your leniency in this matter."

She's really thrown herself into the servant role recently. I continued walking, and Seras followed a few paces behind.

"Something else bothering you?" I asked, stopping until she caught up with me.

"Ah, it's nothing, but..."

"Go ahead and say it—you just said how lenient I am, right?"

"Well, it's just...that story you told Eve about the bloodsport gladiator...it was a lie, wasn't it?" she said, studying my expression.

I knew she'd pick up on that.

"It was, yeah. Parts of it were true, but some of it I just made it up on the spot to add a little flair. Maybe not my finest hour, but she needs to be less trusting of the baron and the mercenary guild. And the bloodsport world in general. We needed to plant some seeds of doubt in Eve Speed's mind."

I took out my pocket watch.

“All that’s left is to wait for those seeds to sprout.”

I saw this all the time in media—characters weaving webs of believable fiction, provoking others into betraying their friends. All while they present themselves as honest and upright, making their targets question their own beliefs and feelings.

“To make her doubt the people she knows?”

“Yeah.”

I’m the one breaking the bonds that connect the hero to the life she knows—the people she thinks she can trust. In other words...

“It’s something a villain would do.”

We returned to the main street, now illuminated by twinkling lanterns that lined the road. There was a crowd forming near one of the houses.

“I wonder what happened there,” said Seras.

“Let’s take a look.”

We walked over slowly, naturally working our way towards the crowd. As soon as we got close, I could see what had attracted everyone’s attention. On the house the crowd was gathered around, someone had painted a large black circle filled with geometric symbols.

“What happened here?” I asked a woman. She looked like she was just dying to spread the gossip to somebody.

“This is Ashint’s work, this is,” she said quickly.

“Oh, the band that uses cursed magic?” I replied.

“I hear that they argued with a man in the tavern last night. He didn’t like the way them Ashint folk were acting in there, an’ he went up and asked them to stop.”

“And this is his house? Is he inside?”

“No, they beat him up, sent ’im to a clinic.” The woman hung her head. “His father was just taken there too—he was alone in the house.”

“They even came for the man’s father?”

“Well, they cursed him, that’s for sure. They were just here, giving their important speeches and whatnot, tellin’ people how it is. A curse on the father for raising a son who would defy the Cursed God and his

spawn Muaji, they says. His father fell t' the curse while he was still in bed."

"Are these curses real?" I asked.

"The father came running out of the house, scratching at his throat like a madman and spittin' up red froth. Not a mark on 'im otherwise, though. He was cursed, I'm sure of it. Oh, they terrify me, they do..."

Curses, eh?

"Mebbe they really did kill the Elite Five. Strength doesn't mean nothin' once they get them curses on you. 'Course, now the baron is going to get involved..."

"You mean Baron Zuan is interested in recruiting them?"

"Those are the rumors, but people think maybe the Monster Slayer Knights are the ones really pulling the strings," said a man standing next to me, inserting himself into our conversation.

The woman pouted, upset at being interrupted, but the more the merrier as far as I was concerned.

"The fall of the Black Dragon Knights is a blessing for us in Ulza. They say we're protected by the Goddess' influence, but we all remember our fear when we heard that Bakoss invaded Neah. Not even the Dragonslayer and Monster Slayer Knights combined could've taken on the Black Dragon Knights," said the man.

"The Black Dragon Knight Slayers are heroes, they are!" said the woman, and the man nodded enthusiastically.

I thought back to what Ashint had said—they'd called themselves the saviors of Ulza, and now they were calling themselves the Black Dragon Knight Slayers too. They were obviously trying to horn in on the Dragonslayer's popularity with that name—while also making it clear that they were far stronger than him.

"The king probably wants to embrace these heroes, y'know? Use them against the other powers."

The countries are still vying for power, even with the Demon King's armies on the move? Still, this is interesting...the Goddess doesn't have complete control over the continent. The Monster Slayer King is trying to use the baron to employ Ashint so he doesn't have to deal with them directly, which gives him a little distance—plausible deniability to the other powers.

But it keeps Ashint close so they aren't poached by some other country.

The woman sighed. "These curses're scary. Took down the Elite Five, didn't they? And with what happened to the man who lived here, and Ashint being taken under Baron Zuan's protection... No one's gonna stand against them, king or peasant," she said.

"Be nice if they cleared out of the capital already!" grumbled the man.

"Shh! You want to get cursed next?"

The man quickly scanned the area, looking anxious.

"These Ashint are a fearsome bunch..." he said. He laid a hand on my shoulder, laughing nervously. "You be careful, kid. Ah, you'll probably be fine. You don't look like the type to go around starting fights with the big dogs anyway!"

I thanked him and left, meeting up with Seras on my way out of the crowd. As we walked back to the inn, I filled her in on what I'd learned.

"I wonder when the truth will be exposed," said Seras.

"Hopefully we'll be in the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters by then," I said.

"It does quite vex me to see them acting so arrogantly," Seras said, glancing back at the crowd. "Though at least we know that they truly believe their curses are what killed the Elite Five..."

Back in the tavern when Ashint had been claiming their victory over the Black Dragon Knights, Seras had confirmed to me that none of them were lying. They really believed everything they were saying—that their magic took down Civit and the others. Someone, maybe that Muaji guy, had convinced them.

If so, he's quite the con man.

"Well, there's nothing we can do about them now. Let's go back to the inn and pack up—we should leave soon."

"You're right... Regrettably, there's nothing we can do."

As we approached the inn, I heard a voice.

"P-please, stop..."

A familiar-looking man was holding a woman's arm as she tried to

shake him off.

“You are coming with us. Consider it an honor—a privilege. You have been chosen. Come now, don’t struggle.”

Suddenly, I realized where I recognized this man from, and the other men who were watching the spectacle. They were Ashint.

They’re drunk too...

I could always tell when somebody was drunk—my real parents had made sure of that.

“P-please... Just let me go!” the woman begged.

“Insolence!”

One of the other men in the group lashed out, slapping her across the face. The woman gasped in shock and pain.

“We cannot have this!” said the man who’d slapped her. “Take her to Lord Muaji after you’re done. We must have a ceremony to celebrate her conversion!”

“Nhh...”

The girl was on her knees now, in tears. I saw heads poking out of windows from above, but no one came down to intervene. The group was treating it like a joke, grinning and laughing at the woman’s fear.

No wonder people are scared of them.

Seras’s hand rested on the hilt of her sword, but she didn’t take another step forward.

She knows we can’t cause a scene here... We can’t risk drawing needless attention to ourselves. If we get involved in a fight, we might even be stopped from leaving the city tonight.

On the other hand...

“These are monsters we played some part in creating.”

“M-Master?”

“Don’t move.”

“R-right!”

I slowly inched closer, keeping to the shadows. Carefully, I lifted my hand, aiming at one of the men who was hanging back.

I’m in range—all set.

“Berserk.”

“Ghaaah!”

The man began to wail, lunging at one of his comrades.

“Whu—?! What’s gotten into you?! Wh-what are y—”

The crazed man latched on to his friend’s arm and bit down.

“Aaagh! Get away from me! Wh-what are you doing?!”

The group started trying to pry the men apart, but the affected man hung on tight, striking out wildly as they tried to restrain him.

“Ghha?!”

“Dark,” I said, targeting one of the men who’d just been swept off of the berserker.

“Uh... H-huh? I...I can’t see...? It’s pitch black! I can’t see a thing! Aaah!”

The woman they’d been harassing saw her chance and fled.

Now that she’s out of the picture...

“Berserk. Berserk. Berserk.” I applied the effect to some of the others in the group.

There were more confused, angry screams as the new berserkers mindlessly attacked.

“Wha?! What’s gotten into you?! Gaaah!”

“You freakin’ drunks! Lost your minds as well as all your coin, eh? Hold them down!”

“Ghaaah!”

“Huh?! C-calm down already! Come on!”

One more couldn’t hurt, could it?

“Berserk.”

“Ughhaaah!”

“What the heck is happening?!”

Before long, a group of patrol soldiers arrived on the scene.

“What is the meaning of this?!” said their captain. “Explain yourselves!”

The group had caused a scene, but it had nothing to do with us—

just a bunch of Ashint members fighting in the street. Nobody had even seen us.

Got to test out my skills a bit too—guinea pigs I don't have to feel guilty about experimenting on.

The group continued to flail, confused and panicked. An evil smile spread across my face.

“Muah ha ha, what wonderful dancing, Black Dragon Slayers. I can't kill you here, but thanks for providing a distraction.” I turned towards the inn. “Let's go.”

“Y-Yes!” said Seras, with a little more spring in her voice. She ran to catch up with me.

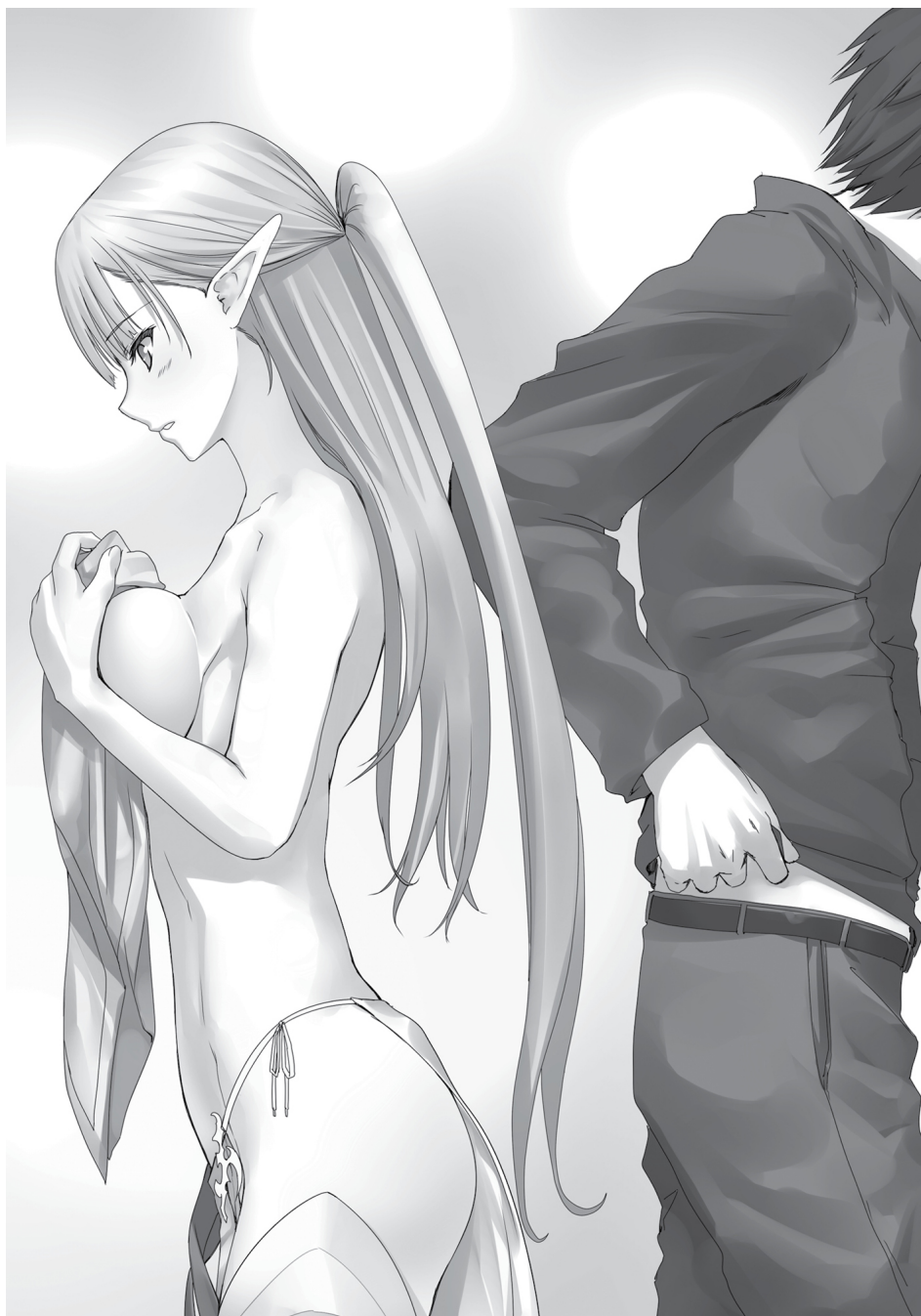
Once we got back to the inn, we decided to get changed before leaving the city.

“Want the room to yourself for a while?” I asked.

“Oh, no, it's fine,” said Seras.

“Okay.”

We turned our backs to each other for a little privacy. The room was silent, except for the sound of cloth sliding to the floor—hers cascading gently, mine dropped in a heap.



Funny how our personalities show even in small things like this...

“Right, then. I’m going to start packing,” I said when I was finished changing.

“Okay,” came Seras’s reply.

I packed quickly, then wrapped Piggymaru under my robes.

“Squuu... ♪”

Seras smiled at us. “Sir Piggymaru really likes you, Sir Too-ka.”

“Squee!”

“I like you too, Piggymaru.”

“Squee! Squee~! ♪♪”

I swung the backpack onto my back. *If this gets much heavier, I’ll have to look into hiring a packhorse.*

“Well, let’s go wait by the bridge to see if she shows up.”

The street outside the inn was still packed.

Grumble...

Seras blushed and averted her eyes awkwardly. “I, ehm... That was embarrassing.”

Was that Seras’s stomach growling?

“We haven’t eaten in a while, have we?”

We decided to buy a quick dinner at one of the food stalls on the main street. It seemed like big cities were convenient like this regardless of what world you were in. No hope of a 24-hour convenience store, but there were quite a few stalls open, even this late at night. We settled on a few kebabs of some sort of meat.

Hmm, could do with a bit more seasoning. It’ll fill us up, though, and that’s all that matters.

We headed in the direction of the bridge, eating as we went.

Munch, munch... “When I was watching you buy the food, it made me think,” said Seras. “When you’re acting, it’s like there’s another person here who isn’t you...almost an illusion. You blend in so well with the crowd, I can hardly spot you anymore.”

I remembered my foster parents. I always acted the part of kind Mimori Touka, never dropping the act so my foster parents wouldn’t see

through the facade. I knew that if they noticed they'd worry, so I forced myself to be a good kid. If they knew how hard I was trying, it would upset them even more, so I had to hide that too.

"It's an acquired skill, I guess. I needed it."

"...I see."

Seras had a bit of meat stuck on her lip.

"You stand out here, don't you?"

"D-do you really think so? I'm trying my best to conceal my presence and blend in..."

Seras couldn't change her appearance far enough from the original to disguise her beauty—or her body. She drew stares wherever she went.

"There are some things you'll never be able to hide, no matter how much you try. Nobody's perfect—see, look."

I pointed to the corner of my own mouth and gestured to Seras. She gave a start and took a white handkerchief out of her bag.

"I apologize for my carelessness. Where should I wipe?" she asked, drawing closer to me and reaching out to dab my face. I grabbed her arm.

"Huh? Ah, Excuse m—"

"Not my face, yours."

"What? Oh!"

Took you long enough to figure it out.

"Give me that." I took the handkerchief from her and wiped the corner of her mouth.

"...I'm so sorry," said Seras.

How do I describe it...

"You've got some surprising blind spots, don't you?"

When we approached the bridge, just out of view of the front gates to the city, there was nobody else in sight. I set my backpack on the ground and checked my watch. Just an hour or so before Eve's deadline.

“You want her to accompany us on our journey, don’t you?” said Seras.

“She’s the strongest bloodsport gladiator around, isn’t she? And she’s a good person, even if she’s tactless and difficult to deal with. But there are reasons besides that for taking her with us. I’m thinking about the future.”

“Of course. I agree with whatever decision you make.” Seras smiled unreservedly.

I looked towards the Bloodsport Colosseum.

Eve Speed had to leave the city of Monroy one way or another. The problem was *when*. If she waited until tomorrow, it’d be too late for us to intervene. Tomorrow was her big day—there’d be people swarming all over her in preparation for it. Seras and I could stage a fight in the colosseum, really cause a scene, but that’d increase the risk of that foul Goddess finding out that I was still alive. Even learning the Forbidden Witch’s location wasn’t worth that kind of risk.

Once the clock hit midnight, we’d leave Monroy, forgetting all about Eve and heading straight for the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters. The ball was in her court.

“Don’t you think there’s a chance it’ll all work out—she’ll win her freedom and live out the rest of her life with the girl she wants to save?” asked Seras.

“Nope, I don’t think so,” I said flatly. “From what I’ve heard, Baron Zuan is a terrible person. There’s no bright future waiting for her when she gets out. Scumbags like him are nothing but poison to good people like Eve Speed.”

I knew all about how poisonous they could be. I’d never trust someone I thought was no good—you’d get no wishful thinking from me.

“Bad people consume the good—eat them up, bones and all, when they don’t have a use for them anymore.”

That’s why my foster dad grew apart from his brother, my birth father, in the first place. Didn’t stop my birth father from pawning me off on him, though. He knew his brother couldn’t bear to let a poor, unfortunate kid suffer.

Seras’s expression darkened.

“There’s no happy ending for her?” she asked.

“Not here there isn’t. For an honest, trusting person like Eve Speed, there’s no way this all works out okay.”

Not unless somebody like me came along. Somebody poisonous to be the antidote to the poison killing her.

“I wonder if she’s coming,” said Seras.

“Who knows? We did everything we could. It’s up to her now.”

I’ve been gambling ever since I got here. My battle with the Soul Eater, the confrontation with Civit...I never had any guarantee of winning. Makes sense that I’d gamble here too. Win or lose, all we can do is wait and see how the dice will fall.

“But if I didn’t think there was a chance, we wouldn’t be waiting out here.”

One by one, the lanterns on the main street went out as we waited for the time to come.

EVE SPEED

EVE RETURNED TO the Bloodsport Colosseum to see two horse-drawn carriages waiting out front. One belonged to the head of the Mercenaries’ Guild, and one to Baron Zaun.

They’re probably having a meeting about the fight tomorrow.

She entered the colosseum through the gate and automatically made her way to the living quarters. All bloodsport gladiators lived here and had their food and board provided for them—a better life than any ordinary slave. The trade-off, of course, was that the colosseum might claim that life in combat. Eve returned to her quarters and lay down on her bed.

...I can’t think straight.

It wasn’t because tomorrow would be her final fight, though. It was because of the man who had called himself Hati and his story of the bloodsport gladiator who died the day after winning his freedom and losing the one he loved forever.

Just like me... But that story, the dead bloodsport gladiator...was it really all planned just so Baron Zuan could take that woman as his slave?

The small spark of doubt within her began to grow. Baron Zuan talked about *her* too.

"I can't wait to see her grow up."

"Wow, I'm looking forward to this one's future."

"You're the only one she likes, huh?"

"For now, sure, but someday she'll need to learn how to live without you."

"Let her know she can trust me, won't you?"

Eve had never been bothered by it before. But now...now it all seemed like warning signs. She closed her eyes, trying to put the thought out of her mind. That man just wanted information about the witch. He would have said anything to get it, even if it meant deceiving her.

Hati was a strange man—not kind or delicate in his choice of words, even when compared to the baron.

So why do I feel that he's telling the truth...?

Eve shook herself back to reality. It was impossible. The baron always kept his promises to Eve, and in return, she contributed greatly to his wealth. Her fights in the colosseum had been very profitable, and her debts to him were more than repaid.

He's sure to grant me mercy after all this...

"Are you trying to convince me? Or yourself?"

She rolled onto her side. As Hati's words came back to her, she realized something.

At first I spoke of Baron Zuan and the Mercenaries' Guild...but towards the end, I was talking about the world of the Bloodsport Colosseum instead. Does that mean that somewhere, deep down, I don't really trust the baron or the guild?

Eve's chest felt heavy and tight as the doubt in her heart continued to grow.

I just want Lis to have a peaceful life. Is that too much to ask? I don't want to fight in the colosseum anymore. I want us to live quietly together.

Eve's fighting always stirred up the audience—she put on a show. The more brutally she could murder somebody, the more the punters liked it and the more she'd earn. But her warrior's pride was long gone.

I've only kept going so long because of Lis—without her to worry about, I would've taken my own life long ago.

Here she was no longer a true leopardman warrior. She was an entertainer now, and she had to come to terms with that.

But if the baron is really after Lis, then...

Eve felt sick. Waves of confusion swept over her. She closed her eyes tight, but she felt anything but tired. Finally, she slowly got out of bed and left her room.

Before long, Eve was in a hallway on the second floor of the colosseum, walking towards the private quarters of Baron Zuan. She knew his door would be watched by the head of his personal guard, Costello. He was the baron's personal confidant, practically made of steel. Eve heard he had killed countless people who dared defy his master.

As a leopardman, Eve had keener senses than humans. She didn't sense the presence of any other guards, so she hid around a corner, out of Costello's sight, where she could listen in on the baron's conversation.

She just wanted to be sure she could trust the baron and the guild to uphold their side of the agreement. Her first idea had been to approach the baron and ask directly: "If I win tomorrow, will you truly set me free?" She'd stopped herself, though. It was hard to imagine that he'd tell her the truth.

I...I've already started to doubt him.

Surprised with herself, she began to concentrate on the voices inside the baron's room. There was nothing suspicious about what they were saying, just preparations for tomorrow's battles. Her opponents would be strong, but she had no objection to that—she had always expected management to prepare worthy opponents for her. She leaned against the wall and breathed a sigh of relief. It sounded like the meeting was almost over.

"Just to check, but are we absolutely sure that Eve Speed will die

as planned?”

She froze. That was the voice of the local head of the Mercenaries’ Guild.

“Why, of course! We’ll have her drink the numbing poison before her match, same as usual.” That was the baron.

“Heh heh heh, the cup of absolution...such a brilliant idea!”

The cup of absolution was a drink given to warriors before their final fight. It was said that the alcohol in a fighter’s system could dull their senses and make them easier to kill. No warrior could refuse such traditions, though, and Eve had always had confidence in her ability to hold her liquor.

They poison the cup.

Her hair stood on end.

“The key is making the poison weak enough, see? The audience will start getting suspicious if the effect is too strong. They want to see a fair fight. Real warriors battling to the death. They start tightening their purse strings if they think someone’s fixing the fights. The peasants in this city are so picky!”

“Eve truly won’t continue to fight in the colosseum?”

“I asked, but alas...she wants no more part of it. Can’t keep fighting like this, some rubbish about honor.” The baron’s voice was high and mocking. “Excuses, nothing more!”

“What a waste. Not many warriors can please the crowd like she can.”

“She’s too strong. She fights like she could defeat her opponents any time she wanted to—like she’s just playing with them. I prepare a place where even these dirty little slaves can shine, and they continue to betray me so!”

“She’s nothing but a beast.”

“Beasts can be put to use, you know.”

“Oh? Do you have something in mind?”

“We skin her and have the victor wear it as a trophy! A leopardman pelt cloak as sign of their triumph.”

“Oh my, how wonderful! We can name them the Leopardslayer!”

“Before the next match, we can have a feast right in the arena. And for the main course, leopardman meat! Oh, that will get the crowd going!”

“The meat of the strongest feeding the next generation of warriors! Fantastic idea! They’re going to love it!”

“This should give her successor a little stability even after she’s gone.”

“But...if she *does* survive...what shall we do?”

“Hm? Kill her, of course. How do you think the audience would feel if they saw her walking around in the outside world? Every time they saw her, they would think, “there goes the strongest bloodsport gladiator alive,” and sigh to themselves in disappointment. How are we to create a new hero if she’s walking around, interfering with our business?”

“You really *can* see the future. Are you absolutely certain we can kill her after the combat?”

“Not to worry—preparations have already been made for that possibility.”

“Incredible, Baron Zuan. As I’m sure you’re aware, rumor has it that she is attempting to buy the freedom of—”

Eve went cold inside.

“The dark elf of Whiteleg Tavern,” the baron interrupted.

“Indeed. We believe the girl may be what has kept her fighting so long. What should we do with her? Release her, perhaps, out of compassion?”

“Ha ha ha, that won’t be necessary. I’ll be taking her under my protection as of tomorrow.”

“Oh? How understanding of you to—”

“She’s a piss-stinking kid right now, but she’ll grow into a real beauty eventually. I’ve always wanted a dark elf... You’ve heard the rumors about them, right? Ha ha ha... I’ll train her with my own hands.”

“Y-you couldn’t touch her when she was under Eve’s watchful eye, could you?”

“Regrettably not. But I’m sure she will quickly adjust to being kept

as a pet by a fine noble like myself. Not to say that I won't sell her to a brothel once I get bored. Dark elves are rare, and after my training, I'm sure she'll be the star attraction! Wha ha ha ha ha!"

"Ha ha ha ha... Y-yet you spent so much time with Eve, didn't you baron? Don't you feel any fondness for her?"

"What a strange thing to ask."

"Huh?"

"How could I feel anything for such a beast? A subhuman creature, nothing more."

Eve considered charging into the room and murdering them both. At the same time, she felt ashamed that she hadn't been able to see through the baron's deceptions.

I never imagined he could be so depraved.

Eve swallowed her rage.

If it were just my life, I wouldn't care...but after my death, what will they do to Lis? The owner of Whiteleg won't protect her, and the baron...I'm the only one who can save her now.

She left the hallway, silently making her way down the stairs and back to her room.

"Oh my, if it isn't Eve Speed!"

A thin, hooded man approached her.

Where did he come from...? Who is he? Even with her enhanced leopardman senses, Eve hadn't detected him coming.

"I'm looking forward to your combat tomorrow."

"Ah...thanks." That was the only response she could manage, and she was relieved when robed figures rushed towards the thin man before he could respond.

"Oh, here you are, Lord Muaji! There's been a problem."

"What is it?"

"Some of the men drank too much, started a fight outside a tavern, and—"

Eve had no time to worry about a tavern fight now.

I have to hurry. She returned to her room and gathered her things.

"I know how these scumbags think."

He was right all along.

Eve quietly left the colosseum, moving quickly and trying not to draw attention to herself. She'd walked away with very little—and almost none of her earnings, which would have been paid upon her release.

Nothing I can do about that now. Perhaps I was closing my eyes to my problems. Running away from reality, just like he said. My dream of living in peace is never going to come true.

It had felt so close, just within reach. She'd believed she was only a step away from achieving it. Just one more day, one more fight, and then she could stop and have a calm and relaxing life. But deep down, she had known that it wouldn't be that easy.

Maybe I was just using her. Using Lis as a reason to keep going... Am I saving her, or is she saving me?

She tried to clear her head.

No. No matter what, the girl was in danger. If Eve didn't save her, she'd be delivered straight into the baron's clutches.

"Save the self-pity," she muttered.

She passed out of the city's main gates and made her way towards the bridge. She had to check before she went to get Lis. They said they'd be here, but she couldn't sense the two travelers she'd met earlier.

Have they already left?

There was a noise behind her.

No, wait...

"You're earlier than I expected."

A shadow emerged from the darkness. It was the man, Hati.

"If you're here, I suppose that means..." he said.

"You were right," she replied.

"Nothing like seeing the truth with your own eyes to convince you, eh?"

He spoke as if he knew she would come—as if he'd been certain.

“Sorry I didn’t believe you,” she said, removing her hand from the hilt of her sword.

“That’s fine. Like you said, we only just met.”

“...”

“So you’re off to get the girl?” he asked.

The swordswoman from earlier stepped out of the shadows behind him. Eve looked back at the city, toward Whiteleg Tavern.

“Of course. I can’t leave her there.”

“You’re willing to come with us to the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters, I take it?”

“I can’t think of anywhere else we could live in peace...especially after this,” said Eve.

I don’t plan on risking our lives somewhere else, either. This world is just too cruel for a little girl to live alone in it...

Eve strengthened her resolve. She was going to take Lis to live with the witch, even if it cost her life.

“I’ll lead you to the Forbidden Witch.”

“Muah hah hah, then I believe we have a deal.” Hati turned in the direction of the tavern, grinning wickedly.

“Let’s go kidnapping.”

THE GIRL AT WHITELEG TAVERN

“HHEY, LIS! Don’t just stand there, bring this to the table!”

Lisbeth nodded quickly. “I’m s-sorry!”

She hadn’t just been standing, she’d been clearing the plates off a dirty table. She couldn’t protest, though. Lis knew just what would happen if she did.

“I’m sorry for the w-wait!”

“Tch, it’s cold! Gimme a discount! Apologize!”

“I-I’m so sorry...”

The customers at Whiteleg Tavern were a bad crowd—Eve always said so.

“Lis! You screwed up again?! Seriously, give me a break! Who do you think’s feeding you and keeping a roof over your head?! Cat got your tongue?! Answer me!”

“...Yes.”

“You think you’re funny? Apologize! Now!”

“I’m s-sorry.”

“Not just to the customers, to *me*! C’mon!”

“I’m sorry, mistress.”

“Fine, fine! Get on with it, no slacking off! This order’s next!”

“...Okay.”

Her mistress jabbed a long finger towards the customers. “Get a move on!”

She was being shouted at even more than usual today. That was okay, though. Tomorrow Eve would come for her—that’s what she promised.

I have to put up with it until she comes for me. She said she would rescue me from here...

Eve never lied. She was the only thing that kept Lis going—Eve was her only hope.

Big sister...

She touched the carved wooden necklace that Eve had given her. Lis hated working in the tavern, but she didn’t want to cause any trouble for Eve. She knew how hard it was for her to survive as a bloodsport gladiator, risking her life every day.

All that for someone like me. I have to do my best—I have to fight too. Be strong. Like Eve. I can’t complain.

Eve had it harder—much harder.

Lis finished drying off some dishes.

“You’re still not done with the dishes?! Dark elves are *useless*, I tell ya! Pick up the pace!”

No matter what Lis did at the tavern, it was always too slow and

never good enough. She was useless and stupid, and told so often—nobody ever said anything good about her.

I can't give in.

She remembered Eve's words.

"We're going to fight as a team and win our freedom together."

We're a team. I can't lose...I can't give in.

There was only one man left by the end of the night, still happily drinking away.

"Gulp, gulp... Wa ha hah! Jeez, I can't live without this stuff!"

"Tch, how long are you going to be here? It's closing time—finish your drink and get out," said Lis's mistress.

"Fine, fine, okay," said the man. His sleepy eyes fixed lecherously on Lisbeth, and he stared openly.

"This kid's sure grown up good, ain't she? Better th'n when she first got here, heh heh. Sure there aren't other places she'd be better off workin'? Bet you could make a heck of a lot more money if you stopped wasting her in this dirty little hole of a tavern!"

"Huh?! Screw you!" Lisbeth's mistress yelled. "She's promised to someone already—I'm just keeping her for a while! You ain't touching her, hear me?! That kid gets so much as a scratch, I'll lose my freakin' head over it. No bruises, no cuts, nothing."

Lisbeth's mistress never did anything that left a mark.

"Heh, to your liking, is she? Jealous? Hyuck hyuck, cryin' shame, that is."

I'm promised to someone already...she must be talking about my big sister.

"Tch, but giving her to just one man? What a waste..." said the drunk man. He grabbed Lis's arm. Lisbeth flailed and jumped away, holding herself away from him, her skin crawling.

"Hey, I said no touching! The customers here are pure trash!"

"Heh heh heh, sorry."

"You too, Lis! Stop making eyes at them, little girl. You're old enough not to act like a slut. You do this just to spite me."

"I...I'm sorry."

The drunk man burped.

“What the matter with this kid anyway...? She doesn’t smile, she doesn’t cry. You got any feelings in there? No man’s gonna want if you don’t show him a good time,” he said.

“Ah ha ha ha! Y’know, this’ll make you laugh. The insolent little brat’s just putting on a brave face! She can’t lift a freakin’ finger against me...! Look~!”

Slap!

Lisbeth’s mistress slapped her on the back of the head with the palm of her hand.

“Take that! And that! And that!”

She kept striking, over and over, in well-practiced motions.

“How much can you take this time, eh?”

After ten or more strikes...

Sniff...

Tears welled up in her eyes. Lisbeth whimpered faintly, bit her lip, and tried to bear it, but it was no use. She started sobbing.

“Heh heh... Would you look at that? No more brave face, eh? This is *real* discipline, y’see,” said Lis’s mistress.

“Nah... I mean, yeah, but...don’t you feel kinda bad for the kid?”

The drunk man’s smile was wavering. Lisbeth wiped her tears away and breathed deeply, trying to regain control of herself.

I can’t give in. I have to stay strong, even just inside. Like Eve.

“You feel bad for her? Hah! I’m the one you should feel bad for! I work my ass off and this kid is useless! What’s wrong with letting her know?” She turned her attention to Lis. “What the heck’s wrong with you, anyway? Since when do you start crying so fast? My arm was just getting warmed up! Heh heh, I know the thing you *really* don’t want me to do~!”

Lisbeth’s mistress put her mouth next to Lis’s ear, breathed in deeply, and then screamed.

Lisbeth’s ears burned, and her body felt like there was a hot pressure pushing down on her. She couldn’t take it anymore—she dropped to the floor and balled up, holding her head in her arms and

closing her eyes. She knew better than to try to cover her ears.

“Nh... *Sob...*”

The tears came back.

I’m sorry, big sister. Sorry I’m so weak...

“Think I’m going to head home. Just, er, don’t go too far, all right?”

The man stood and left the tavern quickly. Her mistress never let up screaming though, not for a second.

Big sister...

“You arrogant little brat! I’ll kill you! Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah! Aaaaaaaaaah!”

Bang!

The door swung open. Lis’s mistress stopped screaming.

“I-It’s you—!” said her mistress. Lis stayed balled on the floor, more afraid of her mistress than interested in whoever came in.

Footsteps drew closer.

“Huh?!”

She heard a muffled wail, then a loud bang. Lisbeth opened her eyes.

What? This smell...

“You didn’t tell me it was this bad.”

Trembling, she raised her head to see the leopard face of her big sister standing over her.

“Big sister...?”

But tomorrow’s her big day. Why is she here now?

Eve closed in on the tavern owner, who shrieked and fell backwards.

“Wh-what are you doing?! Tomorrow’s your last fight, isn’t it?! You have to get back, before—”

Thump!

“Ghn!”

Eve kicked Lis’s mistress across the room.

“Th-the baron will hear about this! Don’t think you can get away with—”

“It’s over,” Eve interrupted.

I’ve never heard her sound so scary before...

“I’m taking her, *now*, away from this place. As for you...”

“No! Please, forgive me!” The tavern owner dropped to her knees, begging for mercy. “I only disciplined her so much on Baron Zuan’s orders! He told me to break her—wanted her to be easier to handle once he took her in! I didn’t want to do it, but I had no choice! He’d kill me if I didn’t do what he asked!”

She pushed her forehead to the floor. Her whole body was trembling.

“I have people I care about too...people who would be sad to see me die. Please, spare my life!”

“Hmh...”

“I won’t tell anybody it was you, I promise! I’ll tell them the girl just ran away. I’ll lie to the baron, I swear it! Please, I’ll do whatever you ask! Don’t kill me!”

“You promise to stay quiet?” asked Eve.

“O-of course! I swear it, I do!”

The tavern owner looked at Lisbeth with tears streaming down her wrinkled face.

“I’m sorry for everything I’ve done. Please forgive me. You’re a good kid, Lis. You’re kind... What have I done to you...?”

Eve reached out and took Lisbeth’s hand in hers, squeezing it tight. Eve’s hands were hot and reassuring. They made Lis feel warm inside.

“Big sister...”

“Something’s come up—we have to leave the capital. I’m sorry... there will be hard days to come on the road. Do you still want to come with me, Lis?”

“Y-yes,” Lis said through uncontrollable sobs. “I’d go anywhere, as long as it’s with you, big sister.”

Eve’s eyes had softened, but they narrowed again as she faced the

tavern owner.

“Listen up. Eve Speed heard about the girl’s disappearance and went searching. South. In return, your life.”

The tavern owner nodded frantically.

“I-I understand! I’ll tell them! Th-thank you! I’ll never forget your kindness this day! Lis...grow strong, all right?”

Lisbeth bowed her head to her mistress.

“Thank you for everything,” she said carefully.

“Y-yeah! *Sob.* Be safe, Lis!”

Eve pulled Lisbeth to her feet.

“Let’s go.”

Lisbeth stopped when she saw the figure in the doorway.

“Big sister? Th-there’s someone—”

It was a monster, robed in black with the head of a fly. Lisbeth ducked behind Eve, peeking out to look at it.

“Don’t worry, he’s a friend. That man saved my life—you can trust him,” said Eve.

Now that she looked closer, Lisbeth saw that the figure was a person—just wearing a frightening mask.

“A... A good person?”

“Yeah.”

Wham!

The fly man thumped the wall hard. Lisbeth flinched, closing her eyes tight. Her shoulders hunched up and she started shaking. She opened her eyes a little and looked up, still trembling, to see the fly man approaching her. He reached out a hand towards her, and she shrank away from him.

He gently placed his hand on her head.

“Sorry for frightening you. I had to be sure...”

It was a man’s voice—he sounded young. *Dignified, though...like he’s a king*, thought Lisbeth.

“Your reaction told me everything I need to know about that woman,” he said, taking his hand off her head. “Eve, you and the girl go

on ahead.” The fly man walked past them. “I’ll catch up—got some business to deal with here first,” he said.

Eve nodded silently and led Lis out of the tavern—she could tell her big sister trusted the fly man deeply. They could hear him talking inside.

“Thought you could get away with it, huh? Tough luck. Managed to get one over on Eve, ’cause she’s a good person, but that terrible acting won’t work on me. So, what? You’re going to tell the baron that Eve went south to look for the girl? Don’t make me laugh.”

His voice had changed. It was like the fly man had become a whole different person.

“There’s no way someone like you would ever keep their word.”

MIMORI TOUKA

WHEN I ARRIVED at the tavern with Eve, the girl’s mistress was already screaming at her. Despite our plan, Eve snapped and rushed in, punching the girl’s mistress and kicking her across the room for good measure. Then Eve took the girl and left to meet up with Seras outside. If everything went to plan, nobody would even know who kidnapped the kid, but Eve wasn’t exactly low profile.

I understood how she felt, though. I had problems of my own with this woman.

“Y-you think I won’t keep my word...?”

It was the mistress, sitting on the tavern floor. I walked over slowly and looked down at her.

“You’ll tell the baron everything as soon as you get the chance. Why keep your word to a leopardman who punched you and disappeared into the night when the baron will keep rewarding you for years to come?”

“Ngh...”

“You don’t seem like the principled type, either. Flexible morals—you’ll do what you have to, right?”

“Ghh... Nh... Who the heck are you, anyway? What are you doing here?”

She was trying to squirm out of answering the question, just buying time while she looked for a way out of this situation.

But there was no escape.

“Who am I? I’m the best person there is, of course! You were abusing a kid, and I’m the one who saved her! I’m a hero.”

The woman turned purple with rage at the taunt.

“Y-you little...! Don’t think you’re going to get away with this! That kid belongs to Baron Zuan, you know that?! You’re not just going against me, you’re going against him! Your life is over, hear me? Yours *and* that disgusting beast’s! Ha ha ha! Serves you right! I’ll give you one last chance to apologize. Give me the brat and get the heck out of the capital. Take that *monster* with you!” she screamed.

“I knew. As soon as I saw the way she flinched, I knew,” I said.

“Huh...? What are you blabbering about?”

“You like screaming, don’t you? Hitting things makes you feel good, right?”

“Huh?”

“You do it suddenly too, right? You catch her off guard, try to scare her.”

“...”

“Keep it up for days, and she gets sensitive to any loud noise. Every time she hears one, she has flashbacks to all those times you’ve screamed at her. Gets all anxious, thinking she’s done something wrong.”

And it would spiral. She’d start looking at everyone around her, scared of what they might do—jumping at every noise, afraid of what it might mean. I *knew*. I was the same way.

I had seen this woman before—she was just like my birth parents.

“Judging by that girl’s reaction, I know exactly how you’ve been treating her, day after day.”

“Shut up! So what?! Who cares what I do with some useless brat? It’s none of your business!”

“It doesn’t sit right with me.”

“Wh-what?”

“You treat her like this, and then...what? Live out the rest of your life like nothing ever happened? It just doesn’t sit right with me.”

“Wh-what did you say...?”

“Hey, it’s also a great way to keep you quiet. The baron’s probably going to figure out that Eve took the girl anyway, but if I kill the only witness, there’s a chance he might not catch our trail.”

The difference between certainty and uncertainty can’t be overstated when it comes to this stuff. Uncertainty always leaves the door open for other possibilities.

“Ghhh...! I-I told you, your lives are already over! The baron’s gonna swoop in and save me, just like I said! He’s the most powerful man in the city—he’s not gonna let you get away with this. You going to start begging for your life or what?!”

I sighed.

“I think that should be obvious.”

“Huh?”

“You’re the one who should be begging.”

The woman scanned the tavern for something to save her, but there was nothing.

She opened her mouth and sucked in a breath, but before she could call for help, I made my move.

“Paralyze.”

She sputtered incoherently, frozen by my status effect skill.

“Dark.”

“Ah? What? Wh-what d-did you do?!”

Non-lethal setting.

“Poison.”

I’d become very good at stacking those three effects on top of each other.

“Ah, gh... Agh! I-it b-burns...”

There were no customers left, and it was late enough that there

was nobody walking around outside, either. Just me and the girl's mistress, all alone in the tavern.

"Shame you can't scream for help anymore," I said.

Her sightless eyes glared in the direction of my voice, and the look she gave me spoke louder than words. I saw everything in her face—all the confusion, the rage...the fear.

I turned towards the door.

"I wish I could take my time and torture you, kill you slowly, but...unfortunately, we just don't have the time."

I drew the shortsword from my belt and held it to her throat. She flinched, realizing there was something sharp pressing against her skin.

"Might not be all that convincing, but we've gotta at least try to make this look like a burglary, eh?"

She started shaking, the sense of dread washing over her in that deep, dark void... I knew that fear. It was the same one I felt in the Ruins of Disposal.

"It's terrifying, isn't it? Not knowing when you're going to die, unable to even see who's coming for you."

"Gh, Ygh.... Ghh... You... 're guh... t-to hell...!"

"..."

"S-save m...e...and y-you can...go... t... h-heaven..."

Heaven or hell, huh? You think you can control what happens after death...?

"You've gotta be kidding me."

I'll do whatever I want—whatever I have to do to achieve my goals. I've involved good people in my quest for revenge and annihilated others for selfish reasons. What can this woman teach me about heaven and hell? I already know.

"Of course I'm going to hell. You and me both."

Chapter 3: With the Lord of the Flies

I APPROACHED THE OUTER WALLS of the capital, freedom waiting on the other side, and made my way to a sewer entrance. I carefully removed the steel bar covering, then carefully replaced it behind me before starting down the tunnel. With both Eve and the girl with us, the main priority was staying out of sight, and the sewers were definitely that.

“Master?”

Seras’s voice echoed from up ahead. I removed my mask as I walked, turning down an offshoot of the main tunnel to find Seras, Eve, and the girl waiting for me. I picked up the backpack I’d stashed in the sewers on our way to the tavern.

“Sorry I took so long.”

“Not at all,” replied Seras.

“Hati.”

It was Eve. I held up a hand to silence her.

“We can talk when we’re a little further from the entrance.”

We set off through the sewers single file, with me at the front and Seras bringing up the rear. After trudging along for several minutes in silence, Eve seemed unable to contain herself any longer.

“Sorry for earlier,” she said. “In my anger, I forgot myself, and...” She trailed off.

“I know, I was there. You have a shorter temper than I expected,” I replied.

“I’m ashamed of my actions.” She hesitated before continuing. “What happened to her?”

“I did what had to be done.”

“...I see.” Eve seemed to catch my drift. “Perhaps I was naïve to believe her.”

“Perhaps, yeah.”

“...”

“Anyway, how’s the girl?”

Eve affectionately patted the girl walking beside her on the head.
“Lis, introduce yourself.”

“O-okay.” We slowed down, and the girl looked up at me timidly.
“M-my name is Lisbeth... Please call me Lis.”

“I’m Too-ka.”

Lis looked confused to have a name offered in return—Eve had the same reaction, for different reasons.

“Hati was a pseudonym,” I explained. “My real name’s Too-ka Mimori.”

“I see. Quite careful, aren’t you?”

“Guess so.” I turned back to Lis. “And this is Seras Ashrain. She’s disguising herself right now with the power of the spirits,” I said as Seras caught up with us.

“It’s very nice to meet you both,” said Lisbeth, bowing.

Seras bowed back at her and reintroduced herself. There was no sign that Lis recognized Seras’s name. We picked up speed again, falling back into line. Eventually Lis ran a few steps forward so she could walk beside me, hanging her head as we rounded another corner.

“Mr. Too-ka...” she said without looking up, “I-I’ll do anything... please can I come with you and big sister? P-please...”

“The place we’re headed...it’s going to be rough. Your life will be in danger. But if you’re okay with that, you can come along.”

“It’s okay. I don’t care how dangerous it is as long as I’m with big sister...”

“All right, then.”

Lis sniffed. “Thank you so much!”

I was planning on bringing her along from the beginning...hmm? Why does she keep looking at me?

“Something wrong?” I asked.

“Ah, ehm... It’s just that y-your voice seems different now than it did when you were the fly man...”

“Yeah, there’s a trick to the costume. That’s probably what made my voice sound weird to you.”

I’d gotten lucky and found some uncommon materials in Monroy, and managed to make another item from *Forbidden Arts: The Complete Works* while Seras was asleep. It was a magic stone that could alter a person’s voice—the book had called it a voice-change crystal—which I stuck to the inside of my fly mask. Pour 100 MP into it, and the crystal’s effect would last for around a day. At first I’d wanted to use it to change Seras’s voice, but it seemed just as useful for disguising myself. And if I ever found better ingredients, I could improve it even more.

Eve closed the distance between us as we continued down the long tunnel.

“I have a question too.”

“Go ahead.”

“I hear a strange noise coming from you. It might just be the water beneath us, but...”

“Oh right, the other member of our party.”

“A friend?”

“Let me tell you before I show you—this little guy’s not dangerous. So don’t attack him, okay?” I stopped. “Seras, go on ahead and check the exit, will you? I’ll introduce these two to Piggymaru.”

“Understood.” Seras scooted past us, and I turned to face Eve and Lis.

“Come out, Piggymaru.”

“Squee.”

Piggymaru plopped out of my robes and onto the ground, making Lis gasp.

“Hm...? A slime?” said Eve.

Piggymaru looked up at me questioningly.

“These are our new traveling companions, Eve and Lisbeth,” I said.

Eve crouched down. “My name is Eve Speed. It’s nice to meet you, Piggymaru.”

The little slime extended a tentacle, which Eve stroked gently with

her hand.

“Squee! ♪♪”

“Hmph... Looks quite fond of you,” Eve said.

“Piggmaru’s my partner—I need this little guy.”

“Squee~! ♪♪”

“Ah, e-excuse me...”

Lis got down on her knees and bowed deep, clearly nervous.

“I’m Lisbeth. Nice to m-meet you...M-Mr. Piggymaru?”

“Squee!”

Lis flinched, her whole body going stiff.

“He says you’re being too formal,” I said, laughing a little.

“Um...just Piggymaru...?”

“Squee~! ♪♪”

“I think he likes that.” Piggymaru turned light pink and stretched out a tentacle in Lis’s direction. “I guess he wants a handshake from you too.”

She hesitantly stroked the tentacle and quickly pulled back, looking a little uncomfortable, but smiling.

“Nice to meet you, P-P-Piggymaru.”

“Squee! ♪♪”

Lis giggled and smiled a little awkwardly.

After the introductions, we left the sewer tunnels and caught up with Seras in the forest.

“I don’t sense anyone nearby,” she said. “I believe we can remain concealed if we make our way through the forest.”

“Do you think the horses are safe?”

“I think so, yes.”

We’d thought about getting a carriage for our escape, but knowing we’d have to abandon it before we entered the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters, it seemed like a bad investment. Instead, we’d prepared two horses ahead of time—we could easily stay out of sight on them and take detours if necessary. The downside was that we’d been forced to

leave them waiting in the forest with nobody to watch over them.

Guess there's nothing we can do now if someone decided to steal them.

I turned to look back at everyone. "Did you fill them in on everything?" I asked Seras.

"I briefed them outside of the tavern while we were waiting for you," she replied, but went over everything quickly once more, careful not to reveal too much.

She's good at this.

"We've got two horses waiting in the forest—one for Seras and I, and one for you two," I explained to Eve and Lis. I'd prepared one of the horses specifically for Eve, expecting that she'd join us.

"Understood. I'm sorry...you must've meant to ride separately."

"Nope. I don't have any horseback-riding experience, so Seras and I always planned to ride together."

It'd make us a little slower, but that couldn't be helped. At least it'd be better than walking.

We made our way through the forest outside the grand city walls of Monroy, trying to make as little noise as possible. Eve wore the hooded cape I'd bought her to conceal her features. Apparently leopardmen were a rare species, and we didn't want her to stand out. She'd have to wear that thing at least until we made it to the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters.

Too bad Seras's powers only work on herself...

"Hey, do you have a minute?"

It was Eve. Seras and Lis were chattering happily behind us.

"Got a million questions?"

"Hmph."

"I'm just joking. Go ahead."

"I intend to lead you to the Forbidden Witch, but...I have something to ask you first. Why do you want to find her?" she asked.

"I have some ancient scrolls that I don't know how to read. I'm searching for someone who can help me decipher them, and I think your witch might be the only person for the job."

I don't want to go into too much detail and let too much of what I know slip. The forbidden magic contained within these scrolls...with that knowledge, I could be a real danger to that foul Goddess. The Forbidden Witch is hiding in the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters to escape the Goddess's clutches, so there's a good chance she'll be willing to help.

"You don't want to catch her, do you? Or cause her harm?"

"No. Not unless she attacks me first."

There was no light in the dark forest, but Eve never hesitated, striding forward at a steady pace as we talked. I was used the darkness too, but it was as if Eve could see through the blackness.

"Can you see in the dark?" I asked.

"More or less."

Those ears, plus her night vision...they might be useful later.

"You don't hesitate, either. Most humans fear the dark."

"I've been through a lot—gotten used to it."

"What about Seras Ashrain?"

"She has her own light sources." Not that we could use them now. There was a good chance the watchers on the walls would see a light at this distance, and that was the last thing we wanted. There was no telling when the baron would figure out Eve had left the capital, but he'd probably send out hunters as soon as he did. No point in making their search easy.

"I'm a simple woman," said Eve, staring intently out into the forest, "and I can't think ahead like you do. Sometimes I make unwise decisions because I can't see the full picture. I think that's why Baron Zuan was able to use me for so long. I didn't see that tavern owner's true nature, either."

"It's not like I can see through everyone and everything, you know. You seem to have a much better grip on yourself than I do, anyway."

Eve hesitated for a moment before continuing.

"I want to offer myself into your service."

"What?"

"I want you to command me, tell me what to do next. I'll do

whatever you ask of me.”

“You really trust me that much?”

“I’ve seen the way you and Ashrain talk. I think it’ll be better for me to just follow your orders. To be honest, I don’t know how much I should trust anyone right now, but...” Her gaze turned to Lis. “But I feel like I can trust you.”

“I appreciate it, but...why?”

“You could’ve gotten information about the witch from me in much more underhanded ways. Could’ve abducted me while I was paralyzed and tortured me. Could’ve used Lis to blackmail me into giving you what you wanted—and it would have worked. You did none of those things.”

Not like I didn’t consider them. You aren’t as dull as you think you are.

“Lis is going to get in our way,” said Eve.

“...”

Eve was right. Lis couldn’t fight, and she was young. It would be tough battling through monsters *and* protecting her—somebody was always going to have to watch her.

“You know that as well as I do, considering where we’re going. But even knowing that, you still agreed to let her come with us. You understood how she felt and what she needed. That’s another reason I feel I can trust you.”

She’s right, but there are plenty of underhanded reasons I could have agreed to bring Lis. I could be assuming she wouldn’t survive anyhow, that she’d be killed by monsters. I could be planning to get the information from Eve early on and then ditch Lis...or I could be planning to threaten her to convince Eve to play along. But is she even capable of imagining someone thinking like that?

I intended to protect Lis with everything I had, though. No matter what, I would make sure she survived.

“You’re a good person,” said Eve. “Trust isn’t measured in days and hours. That’s something meeting you has taught me.” Suddenly she looked uneasy. “A-am I changing my mind too easily?”

“You *did* say I wasn’t a bad sort, didn’t you?” I said with a soft

laugh. "You're a much better person than I am."

When we got back to the horses, we were relieved to find them still safe, placidly waiting for us. We quickly packed our luggage into their packs. Eve mounted her horse first, then stretched a hand down to Lis, settling the girl in front of her.

"Here, take my hand," said Seras.

I took her hand in mine as she reached down. Her grip was surprisingly firm, and with less effort than I'd expected, I found myself seated behind her on the horse.

I'd told Eve the truth earlier—I'd never been on a horse before.

"Hold on to me firmly from behind so you don't fall off," Seras said, looking over her shoulder at me.

"You don't mind?"

"It needs to be done, and...if it's you, I don't mind," she replied.

I wrapped my arms around her thin waist, clasped my hands together in front of her stomach, and squeezed her gently. Seras flinched a little.

"Too much?"

She didn't reply.

"Seras?"

"It's fine."

"...Are you okay?" I could feel Seras's body getting hotter.

Without answering my question, Seras easily guided the horse in a circle around the small clearing. She appeared used to handling the animal, so her discomfort probably wasn't about that. But it was probably awkward for her to have a member of the opposite sex clinging to her. Unfortunately, I couldn't do anything about that if I wanted to stay in the saddle.

"I don't exactly know what you're so nervous about, but try to bear it, okay?"

"U-understood."

She slapped both her cheeks once, trying to get ahold of herself, and turned towards Eve and Lis.

"Let's go."

There was no sign of anyone as we swept through the forest.

“Sir Too-ka.”

“Yeah, looks like we’re in good shape.”

We followed the roads through the forest and moved at a moderate pace. The sound of hooves thudded dully as we rode along, following Eve and Lis a short distance ahead of us. On occasion they would turn back to check on us, but otherwise were absorbed in each other. I leaned forward and put my mouth close to Seras’s ear to talk with her.

“How far from here to the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters?”

“At this speed, we should arrive in about two days, even going the long way.”

“The long way” was a less direct route, but there were many castles and fortresses on the border of the Land of the Golden-eye Monsters. Their main purpose was to keep the monsters from escaping, but we still needed to avoid them.

“Is there anything else we should be worried about?” Seras had already given me the basic details on our trip to Monroy.

“The intel isn’t certain, but...there is one thing that worries me,” said Seras.

“What’s that?”

“There’s a variety of humanoid monster...ones with human faces. The reports of sightings are few and far between, though, and the details are vague.”

“...”

Seras’s words sent me right back to the Ruins of Disposal, and to the strongest monster I’d met down there—the Soul Eater.

The Soul Eater felt different from other monsters. It was also the only one I saw that had a human face. So that’s what it was—a humanoid monster. If the creatures lurking in the Land of the Golden-Eyed monsters were as strong as that thing was, I could understand why it was such a dangerous place.

“It’s said that there are many of them living in the place we’re going,” said Seras.

“There aren’t many reports of sightings, but people are still sure they’re in there?”

“Well, there is a theory as to why there are so few sightings.” Seras sounded even more serious than usual. “It’s believed that the witnesses tend to...”

“Die, right?” I interrupted. “Killed by the monsters?”

“Yes. At least that’s the theory.”

Dead men tell no tales.

“There are few known details, but they’re fearsome foes. Powerful as they are, however, they aren’t easily found—they don’t just walk around the forest, I mean.”

They’re careful—or maybe they just avoid people. Or is there another reason? All I can do now is speculate...no point in overthinking it.

“Seems like there’s almost no information about this place to begin with,” I said.

“That’s accurate. It’s rare that anyone survives straying into the outskirts, let alone the deeper parts...” Seras hesitated. “Though didn’t Eve say she’d been there before?”

“That’s right.”

Sounds like she went to the more dangerous areas too.

“Is that one of the reasons you decided to bring her along with us?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“What about Lis? Do you think she’s going to be all right?”

“Yeah. She’s a good kid.”

I had assumed, for some reason, that a high elf and a dark elf would be at each other’s throats, but I was relieved to find that Seras and Lis got along.

“But do we really intend to—” started Seras.

“We’re taking her with us,” I said firmly. “Eve has already agreed to it, and Lis doesn’t seem to want to leave her side anyway. Unless one of them objects, I think we should keep going.”

“Are they going to be okay?”

“We’ll make it, one way or the other. No matter what, we’re taking them safely to the Forbidden Witch.”

Seras smiled.

“You really are kind.”

“You and Eve both overestimate that part of me. There are practical reasons for everything I’ve done.” I shifted in my seat a little and adjusted my arms around Seras. “I have a bunch of reasons for taking Eve with us. First, she’s a talented warrior. Second, as you said, she’s been to the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters before. Last, well... if we want to get the information we need from the witch, I figured it’d be best to have her with us.”

“So what you’re saying is...?”

The Forbidden Witch was living in hiding, all but impossible to find, yet...

“Eve owes the witch a favor, right?”

“Ah, I see,” said Seras, seeming to understand.

“Yeah. It’s going to be easier to make contact if we bring someone along who *knows* the witch, instead of just showing up out of the blue.”

It made sense that we’d need an in with the witch—a referral from another acquaintance. But from the way Eve talked about it, I didn’t even know if they’d actually met. There was a distance to the way she spoke—they weren’t friends, I was fairly sure. I really needed to find out more about their relationship, not to mention this favor Eve owed her.

“And hey, about Lis...”

Seras nodded. I thought back to our first day in Monroy and the conversation we’d overheard in the tavern.

“This witch is a dark elf, yeah?”

Seras glanced toward the other horse. “Lis is a dark elf too...” she said.

“Yeah. We rescued one of her kind from a really bad place. If Lis and Eve vouch for us, the witch is more likely to trust us. Maybe even be more inclined to help us, if we’re lucky.”

That’s why I have to make sure Lis survives and bring her to the witch.

“So you were looking that far ahead... I should’ve expected as much from you, Sir Too-ka.”

“Best to have as many advantages as we can get. I was just being calculating.”

Ahead of us, Lis was still talking happily with Eve.

“Well, also, there’s...”

“...”

The abuse from my birth parents, and the way that tavern owner was abusing Lis...they just kinda collided. I can’t save my past self, but maybe I can save Lis. Like I said before, she’s a good kid.

“She seems a lot happier,” I said, finally. “Better that she’s happier.”

“Yes...I think so too.”

Eve was the first to react, her ears pricking up, then Piggymaru.

“What was that sound?”

I turned to see lights flickering in the forest behind us. Seras turned back to look at me, her face grave.

“Sir Too-ka.”

“I know. They’re on our tail.” I was surprised they’d found us so fast.

We pushed the horses faster, and Seras urged ours forward to bring us level with Eve and Lis. They both looked shaken.

“What is it?” I asked.

“I would often walk the capital alone at night. They shouldn’t be so surprised not to find me in my room,” said Eve.

The tavern had been closing when we left too. The tavern owner was the only one there, and I’d put out the lights. I didn’t think they’d find the corpse until morning at the earliest.

“Did you tell anyone of your plans to escape? A friend from the colosseum, maybe—”

“No,” Eve said, cutting me off. “I didn’t tell a soul. I was trying as hard as I could to avoid detection by the baron and his personal guard.

But..." Eve groaned miserably. "As I was leaving the colosseum, I ran into someone. Perhaps he noticed something strange about me."

"Do you know who it was?"

"A man named Muaji. I was careful to avoid people, but... embarrassing as it is to admit, I didn't notice his presence until it was too late to ignore him."

I glanced back at the lights racing through the trees.

Eve's guess is probably right—Muaji must've realized there was something off about her.

"He's the head of Ashint. He must've reported to the baron that something seemed off, and maybe had him check your room and the tavern just to make sure."

The pursuit had been organized so fast because of how quickly they'd been able to put the pieces together, all thanks to Muaji. The leader of Ashint must've have quite the powers of observation. He realized almost immediately that something was off with Eve, and it must not have taken him long to figure out what happened at the tavern, either. He was good at reading people too—an invaluable skill for a con man.

"Muaji's probably using this to prove himself to the baron—a good chance for a show of power, maybe."

There would have to be Ashint members mixed in with the search party. They were coming to kill or capture Eve, and either way they'd be demonstrating their strength. They'd become the group that took down the strongest bloodsport gladiator with their curses, which would add weight to their lie about killing the Elite Five too.

"I'm sorry...I've exposed you all to danger by coming with you." Eve slowed her mount, and Lis looked up at her uneasily.

"B-big sister?"

"Too-ka, take Lis—"

"And what?" I interrupted, "You're going to stay and hold them off?"

"No, big sister, you can't..." said Lis, tears in her eyes.

"Let me take responsibility for this. I can at least make sure that you and the child escape!"

“Strongest bloodsport gladiator or not, you can’t defeat that many people at once,” I said. “And what are we supposed to do without you to guide us to the witch?”

“They’re gaining on us. We don’t have long,” said Eve.

The lights behind us were closer, but also appeared to be decreasing in number. Some split off from the main group to search the forest in different directions.

There are still too many of them, though...

We continued up a slight incline, and I looked back again from the slightly higher vantage point to get a better view of the group following us. I could see lights dancing in the darkness a distance behind the main group.

“There’s a second group behind this first one. Looks like a lot of them too.”

We’re in trouble.

“Stop the horses and dismount,” I ordered quickly. Seras slowed our horse; Eve appeared confused.

“Wh-what are you doing?” she asked.

“I’ve got an idea.”

We dismounted and sent our horses racing into the darkness ahead of us, glowing branches strapped to the saddles.

It was lucky that Eve and Seras were so good at handling the animals.

The horses sped off into the forest, lighter and faster now without their burdens. We’d made the branches glow using the power of Seras’s spirits, which could make an object light up for a short period of time. The price for doing so was tough on Seras, though.

“Sorry about that. I’ll help you sleep once we’re out of this mess,” I told her.

Seras smiled tiredly. “I’d appreciate that, Master.”

The sound of hooves was getting closer. We hid, crouching in the brush, and waited for them to pass.

“Vice-chief, over there!”

“Lights?! We’ve got them! Two torches in the forest! That’s the leopardman and her girl, no doubt about it.”

“Muaji was right after all. They headed north!”

“I’d expect nothing less from the Black Dragon Slayers!”

“Shame we sent the others off to search the rest of the forest.”

“Lucky for us we picked this way! Come on! We’ll be calling ourselves the Leopardslayers before this night is through! No Ashint or mercenary’s gonna steal *our* glory! Let’s go! Go!”

The group charged after the horses.

They look like the baron’s personal guard...talk like them too. It sounds like there are others searching the forest in different directions. Shutting that tavern owner up did some good, then—their forces are divided.

“It sounds like they’ve sent everyone out against us...” whispered Eve.

“The baron probably got the mercenaries on board with promises of coin. Ashint are out to prove themselves.”

It would take the first group a while to catch the horses—that bought us some time. Eve carefully turned to watch the second group rushing towards us.

“There were no Ashint members in the first wave. They might be coming next,” she said.

Muaji predicted that Eve would head north—there’s a good chance he’s coming this way.

“Eve, you can see in the dark...how’s your hearing?” I asked.

“Hmph, better than any human’s,” she replied.

“I’ve got a job for you. Once it’s done, I need you to go further into the forest to hide and protect Lis and our things. I’ll be staying here.”

“I’ll fight with you,” she said immediately.

“I need Seras with me for what I’m planning. Somebody needs to protect Lis—they’ll take her as a hostage if they find her. We can’t let that happen.”

Eve was disgruntled, but she backed down. I guess she really did intend to follow my orders, then.

I looked at the sky through the leaves above—there were thick clouds, the moon only occasionally peeking out at us.

Good. I can use the darkness.

“It’s quite likely that they don’t even know you and I are here, Sir Too-ka. They’re only after Eve and Lis—we might be able to catch them off guard,” said Seras.

“...I’m not so sure about that,” I replied.

Seras looked at me questioningly. “What do you mean?”

“It’s just a hunch, but I think Muaji has figured out that Eve has allies. This cursed magic they use, don’t you think there’s something fishy about it?”

“Well...yes, I’d have to agree. Unlike your skills or my spirit armor, there’s no proof that it exists.”

“And yet this Muaji guy has convinced so many of his followers that it does. Seems like he’s even worshipped by some of them...but I think he’s a liar. An evil guy running an evil scam.”

I have my suspicions what this cursed magic really is...

“What are you trying to say?” asked Eve.

“For better or worse, I think the guy’s smart.” I rubbed my temples. “Really smart.”

He’s cold reading us—predicting what we’re about to do next. He must be anticipating how we’ll react even now. The speed of his pursuit shows just how smart Muaji is. He knew Eve would flee north—he must’ve heard the same rumors that we did.

If Eve was going to take Lis and try to escape, Muaji knew that she’d take her chances in the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters.

He read her in an instant.

“Do you think you two can beat that many of them?” asked Eve, shouldering our luggage with ease.

“Depends on our approach. If we can’t take them head on, we’ll need to lure them somewhere the conditions are more favorable to us.”

Lis picked up the remaining bags. I stood up and looked towards the second group of torches bearing down on us.

“I never thought we’d have to fight Ashint here, in the forest...” I

muttered.

“I’m sorry...” Eve said.

I’ve lost count of the times she’s apologized already.

I looked at Eve. “It’s probably true that this happened because of you.”

Lis quickly bowed her head, as if trying to take responsibility for Eve.

“E-everything Big sister did was for me... I’m the one at fault, so... Please...” Her small shoulders were trembling.

I worded that a bit harshly, didn’t I?

I sighed.

“But I’m not blaming either of you for what’s happening.” I took out my fly mask and smiled at them. “If everything goes to plan, this might work out well for us—could even be a stroke of luck.”

Eve and Lis looked taken aback, as if they could have never predicted that response.

I put on my fly mask.

“Well, let’s get started.”

SERAS ASHRAIN

THE MAN AT THE FRONT of the group stopped his horse and looked back.

“Lord Muaji, what should we do?”

The whole group was wearing purple robes decorated with magic circles—Ashint’s normal uniform. Muaji wore a similar robe, but his was obviously much higher quality.

“Extinguish the torches,” ordered Muaji.

“Eh? Oh! Yes! Hey you, put that out!”

With the fires gone, the only light left was faint rays of moonlight shining dimly through the clouds.

“Did you notice that? Broken branches—someone must have panicked and fled in that direction,” said one of the men. “The runaways are still lurking somewhere nearby. The first group is chasing a decoy!”

“All right, you lot! Get into the forest and find that leopardman! The girl too!”

“That won’t be necessary,” said Muaji. “No doubt it’s a trap of some sort.”

“Wha—? A trap?!”

“Someone broke those branches on purpose. Hard to believe they’d be intelligent enough to divide our forces, yet foolish enough to leave obvious traces like those, wouldn’t you say?”

“I-I see.”

“Our enemy is smart. They must have known we wouldn’t miss the branches. But if we go rushing into the forest now we’ll be playing right into their hands—there is a trap awaiting us in the trees.”

“Amazing, Lord Muaji... I never would have thought the leopardman had such intelligence and strategy...”

“She isn’t the one responsible for this.”

“Eh?”

“From what I’ve observed of her, Eve Speed is not the type to use detailed or complex strategies. She has no history of this kind of deception.”

“You mean to say she has help?”

“Yes. Don’t assume we’re only facing the leopardman and the girl—there are others.”

“Tch, that was close! What would we do without you, Lord Muaji?”

Muaji ignored the compliment and raised his voice. “In any case, we’ve seen through your little ruse. Give yourself up and come talk to us.”

Muaji lifted his hand, and the Ashint members readied their bows.

“I know you’re hiding over there! We have more than just bows and arrows, you know. We can easily dispose of you at a distance or

smoke you out—we have options. Hiding behind that tree won't protect you for long."

The moon emerged from between the clouds as Seras appeared from the forest, wearing her fly mask.

Muaji smiled.

"The Fly Swordsman, I see... Though the real Fly Swordsman wasn't female, of course."

Seras's sword was already drawn.

She stayed silent as Muaji continued. "I don't know who you are, but if you hand over the leopardman and the girl, I promise to spare your life." He opened his arms wide. "Better still, I shall welcome you as a member of the order of Ashint! I know just by looking at you how skilled you are with that sword—I daresay you must be quite renowned."

Seras gripped the hilt of her sword tighter.

"What if I refuse?" she said, finally.

"Then I will curse you and make you suffer. You'll wish you'd never been born."

"..."

"Our curses are without equal—not even the Elite Five could stand against them."

"Did you truly kill the Elite Five?" asked Seras.

"Yes. The Strongest Man in the World was powerless before the might of my curses! Now, what shall it be? You can die a painful, meaningless death here or make the *smart* choice and join our cause."

Seras dropped her guard, and she looked at Muaji skeptically for a few moments before speaking again.

"Understood."

Muaji bent his thin frame forward towards her.

"A wise decision."

"I don't believe we could ever defeat you in such numbers," Seras said. "It was always just a matter of time before we were caught."

“And you’re smart enough to accept the reality of your situation without any pointless battles. What an impressive individual!”

“I have one condition. I want you to guarantee Eve and the girl’s safety.”

“We have considerable influence over the baron who is chasing your friends. Fear not, we will protect them from harm.”

“Very well. I’ll take you to them now.”

Seras turned towards the trees.

“All of you, please follow me.”

Seras walked back towards the forest and the Ashint members made to follow her. But Muaji held out an arm to stop his underlings from going any further.

“All of you, stop.”

“Lord Muaji...?”

Seras stopped too. “Is something wrong?”

“You have no intention of handing over the leopardman and the girl, do you?”

Seras didn’t answer, but turned back to face Muaji, sword in hand once more.

“How did you know?” she asked.

“Something about the way you spoke just now. You said ‘all of you,’ did you not? What reason could there be for our whole group to follow you? Surely just a few of us should be sufficient.” Seras didn’t say anything, but Muaji continued. “There is, in fact, no need for you to lead us anywhere. Perhaps it was all just a trick to lead us into range of *something*, perhaps?”

“Ghh!”

“If that’s correct, your trap can’t affect us if we don’t stumble into it. Get into fighting positions, all of you! Spread out!” Muaji raised his arms and started yelling orders. “Hold positions! Ready your bows!”

Seras now had arrows pointed at her from all directions.

“Aren’t you going to kill me with those curses you keep bragging about?” she said, trying to provoke him.

Muaji smiled condescendingly at her.

“The group I have brought with me today are my Cursed Warriors—something of a personal guard.”

“Cursed Warriors?”

“I’ll let you in on a secret—they’re the spiritual successors to the Assassins’ Guild.”

Seras knew that name. “But the guild itself is long gone. After all —”

“Yes, they were wiped out by those Heroes from Another World—or so it is said. After defeating the root of all evil, they turned their sights on the guild as the next ‘evil’ they could fight.”

Muaji kept talking, smiling all the while.

“The heroes and their descendants traveled the continent, crushing Assassins’ Guild branches and imprisoning or killing their members. Eventually the guild was lost to history, no more than a rumor.”

Seras knew the history of the Assassins’ Guild already—it seemed it was less lost than Muaji thought.

“You... Are you planning to resurrect the guild?”

“No, no. We’ve simply laid claim to their unfinished work. As users of cursed magic, you see—”

“You use the same techniques they did,” Seras said. She remembered the man Ashint had fought with in the tavern—his mouth foaming with blood as he lost consciousness.

“That is correct.”

That was no curse.

“Poison.”

“It is as you say.”

The Assassins’ Guild was well known for using poison.

“Our blends are undetectable by normal means. And, well, we have so many varieties. We can make you go helplessly limp or kill you instantly. The brewing techniques have been passed down in secret through the generations, and only the living descendants of the guild are capable of making our poisons.”

Muaji scratched his chin idly.

“And, well...the Assassins’ Guild was *ever* so talented at killing without leaving a trace.”

“You’ve been assassinating your targets with poison, then publicly calling it cursed magic.”

Many countries forbade poisons and considered them contraband. Yonato and Alion were particularly strict about it, classifying all poisons as illegal substances and strictly punishing any use or possession of them.

Ashint used a specially made poison that was difficult to detect, and they were always careful to ensure their marks didn’t even know they had been poisoned. As assassins, they then removed any trace they’d ever been there.

That’s all Ashint’s curses were—not magic at all. Poisons were forbidden in many countries, but curses... The existence of a curse in the first place was vague and undefined. No one could prove a curse had been put on somebody—but nobody could prove it hadn’t, either.

“Then what should land in our lap but the fall of the Black Dragon Knights? The sudden death of the Elite Five, who always baselessly claimed the title of the strongest warriors on the continent—”

“Only an inhuman curse could explain their deaths,” Seras cut in, finishing his sentence.

“Exactly. What powers of deduction! Yes, that is why we took the title Black Dragon Slayers for our own. To convince others of the strength of our curses. It was the perfect opportunity.”

He’s right—there was too much left unexplained about the fall of the Elite Five. There was no obvious culprit. Only the ones who were there that day know the truth. Why not blame curses, then? The inexplicable magic of a curse was a convenient way to explain what happened.

“What will you do if the the real killers learn of your lie and expose the truth?” asked Seras.

“Heh heh, maybe your reasoning is worse than I thought. Whoever did the deed was only capable of doing so because we cursed their opponents.”

Arguing with them is pointless. They’ll keep insisting their curses defeated the Elite Five, yet there’s no way of telling if those curses even exist. Not even the true killers can disprove it. In some ways, their argument is

unassailable.

“Nobody can prove our curses don’t exist. They *might* have caused their deaths. That uncertainty is all we need to guarantee our victory. Without solid proof to the contrary, the truth is whatever we say it is.”

“What if the *real* Black Dragon Slayers come for you?”

“Heh. Even if they did exist, we would wait for our chance to strike and assassinate them. In truth, I believe we could have defeated the Elite Five anyway. Perhaps Civit Gartland was the strongest warrior in combat, but assassins have *true* strength. Why should anybody fight fair? Real strength lies with those who use poison, strategy, and wit to defeat their foes.”

“...What do you want?”

“Assassination work pays well. There’s always someone who wants someone else out of the picture. We’re going to use Baron Zuan to gain a foothold and work our way slowly into the very heart of this world.”

“Assassinating anyone who gets in your way, I presume?”

“Yes. Eventually, we’ll take a country for ourselves.”

“You plan on controlling Ulza from the shadows?”

“We do.”

That’s why they’re trying to win points with the baron by capturing Eve... Too-ka was right about everything.

“Where are the others?” asked Muaji

“Aside from Eve and the girl, I’m working alone,” replied Seras.

“Hard to imagine you’d attempt to face us single-handedly.”

Seras hesitated, then brought her hand up to her mask. For a moment, the group of Ashint members looked ready to shoot her, but Muaji gestured for them to hold their fire.

“Allow me to show you why I believe I’d be more than a match for you.”

She took off her mask and dispelled her disguise.

“I survived my battle with the Elite Five, after all.”

Muaji’s underlings began to murmur amongst themselves—the wanted posters of Seras had been circulated far and wide, and

apparently many of Muaji's people had seen it.

"Hmm, you've even surprised *me*. The fly swordsman turns out to be Seras Ashrain in disguise..." Muaji looked satisfied. "But now this all makes sense. You're having the leopardman guide you to the Forbidden Witch in exchange for aiding in her escape. Two wanted runaways taking their chances on the road. Not to mention—"

Muaji scrutinized her closely. "Are you the one who killed the Elite Five?"

"What if I am?"

"No...it wasn't you. It was someone else."

"What makes you think that?"

"It's simple. You're weak. You couldn't have possibly overcome the Strongest Man in the World. I believe you're even weaker than some of my men here."

Muaji snapped his fingers and a man stepped forward, removing his hood as he did so. His bald head was covered in tattoos, and he had hollow, sunken eyes.

"He was to be one of the leopardman's opponents in the colosseum. His name is Belgar. And there's another—"

Muaji pointed toward the forest behind her. Seras squinted into the darkness and could just make out a man on one knee holding a crossbow. The thick bolt glinted dully in the torch light—it was pointed straight at her.

"Belgar's brother, Varagan. They're the strongest warriors Ashint has at its disposal."

Seras could immediately tell that they were a serious threat. She also had a strange sense that she had seen them somewhere before.

"Not to mention—and isn't this serendipitous! They had a younger brother," continued Muaji. "Zarash Finebird."

Seras gasped.

Zarash Finebird...

He was a member of the White Walkers, the deadly band of mercenaries that had pursued Seras before Too-ka killed them all.

"Ringin' any bells? That's right. The one who chased you for so

long...these are his older brothers.”

“Zarash was an incompetent kid,” said Belgar, his voice emotionless, “but I can’t believe he was killed by the likes of you. Seras Ashrain doesn’t live up to the rumors. We’re stronger than that failure Zarash was, you can be sure of it.”

“...”

Even with her spirit armor, her battles against the White Walkers had been difficult—and Zarash was the strongest of them.

If these two really are even stronger than he was...

Muaji grinned at her.

“Do you understand now? Ashint isn’t simply a group of assassins and poisoners. We’re more than capable of fighting when we have to.”

The two brothers watched Seras closely, ready to strike as soon as she moved. The moon slipped behind the clouds, and the forest darkened further.

“We have the skills of the Assassins’ Guild, the combat strength of a military power, and, of course, my intellect and insight! A leopardman’s brute strength is no threat to us. Even if the ones who truly defeated the Elite Five came to challenge us, I am confident that we could best them.”

Belgar licked his lips—the others were staring at her too, despite the darkness obscuring the lines of her body.

“What will it be, Seras Ashrain? Any signs of resistance and Varagan’s arrow will pierce you fast and true. If that leopardman comes pouncing out of the shadows, Belgar will crush her in an instant.”

Seras took a step backwards.

“Oh, and I don’t recommend fleeing into the forest. My underlings already have you surrounded.”

“Incredible, Lord Muaji! The girl is ours, completely caught in your trap!” one of his supporters cried.

“You aren’t the only one using a decoy, Seras Ashrain. Shocking, isn’t it?” He spread his arms wide as if divulging his master plan. “We are the decoy!”

He had split his forces in two, one holding torches and one stealthily moving through the darkness. Everything they said to Seras

had been a distraction to keep attention off the second group, and now she was surrounded.

“I’ve only been speaking to you to buy some time. My underlings have now completely sealed off your escape,” said Muaji, smiling broadly as he stepped towards her. “You couldn’t help but listen to me tell you all my plans, could you? Oh, I know. People do so love to hear the solutions to mysteries. And I am *truly* a master of the art of conversation.”

Seras looked over her shoulder for a moment. If there was a trap waiting for them in the forest, the group he sent out in the darkness would’ve been the first victims of it.

They’re just disposable pawns to him.

“Perhaps my underlings have already caught the leopardman and the girl. They are experienced warriors, and impressively quiet, wouldn’t you say? They conceal themselves and sneak up on their targets from behind, for that is the way of the assassin.”

The fickle moon appeared from behind the clouds once more, bathing Seras in its white light. Muaji’s eyes softened.

“Well now, what beauty...”

Those watching Seras couldn’t conceal their excitement. She saw the gleam in their eyes and knew exactly what they were thinking. The two brothers stared, and even calm, composed Muaji couldn’t disguise his interest.

“I will give the blessing to you *personally* and take you in as a true disciple of the Cursed God. We’ll need to shed your skin first. If you truly know anything about who defeated the Elite Five, my blessing will make you want to divulge every last secret. All those who receive it become bound to obey my every word.”

Blessing? A mind-control drug, perhaps?

The Ashint figures around Seras were closing in now, cutting off her escape.

“The arrows we have trained on you are tipped with poison. One scratch and you’ll freeze up completely. Even if you escape the arrows, I doubt you’ll get away from the brothers. No matter how strong you are, all are powerless against our cursed magic status effects!”

Muaji took another step forward and laughed.

“Checkmate, Seras Ashrain.”

“Ngh...” Seras took a careful step backwards.

“I predicted this outcome from the very beginning—it’s the only reason I’ve told you so much. You were so spellbound by my conversation, by my skills and my truth, that you never even realized I was cutting off your escape. All that’s left is to return that leopardman and the girl to the baron. Down on your knees for me. Let’s hear you beg for forgiveness, shall we?”

Muaji’s eyes gleamed.

“Seras Ashrain, I will grant you the honor of bearing my children. Be grateful...”

The moon disappeared again, a last ray of hope vanishing and leaving Seras in the darkness below.

Sir Too-ka...

Her neck was covered with cold sweat.

Now...

“ASSAULT ACCEL.”



The Lord's signal came shooting out of the darkness.

Chapter 4:

A Dark Strategy and a Disappearance

EVE COULD SEE in the dark, of course, but her hearing was truly incredible when she concentrated—she was practically like a sensor. Apparently, that was normal for leopardmen.

When we saw the second group approaching, I asked her to track their movements by putting her ear to the ground. I checked the number of torches against the number of soldiers that Eve heard, but something was off. There were about thirty torches approaching, but Eve reported forty-five soldiers coming our way—fifteen unaccounted for. There were two groups, both heading towards us.

After giving my orders to Seras, I went with Eve and Lis into the forest. Seras was to buy time by speaking with the torch-holding group. I trusted her to pull it off, but I didn't expect perfection.

If I ask too much, she'll only feel pressured.

No matter what I asked, she would do her best, though—that much I knew. I told Seras that I was entrusting her with the task, and that I wouldn't be upset with her no matter the outcome.

Seras disappeared into the forest, and I went with Eve and Lis in the direction of the smaller group. Eve stopped for a moment, letting her ears acclimate to the sounds of the forest.

"There are fourteen...no, fifteen. They're coming this way," she whispered to me. It was incredible what she could tell just from listening to their footsteps—and it certainly made planning easier.

"Okay. Thanks. Go back and hide with Lis," I said.

"Are you going to be okay on your own?" she asked.

"Don't worry, I'll be fine. You can't leave Lis by herself."

The moon was hidden behind the clouds. A dark forest—just the way I liked it.

I tapped my temple. "Might not be as good as yours, but my senses work too. I spent days fighting for my life in the dark—I'm sensitive to the signs that enemies leave behind." I patted my robe.

“And I’m not alone, either.”

Piggymaru squeaked a little in reply.

After Eve and Lis left, I hid myself in the bushes.

They’re coming this way... I waited for the moon to be completely covered, choosing the darkest moment to strike.

“Paralyze.”

I tried to hit them all at once. Their mumbled, garbled confusion soon reached my ears.

“Wh-wha...? I can’t m-mo...?”

I crept over to the Paralyzed targets and put them to sleep to keep them from letting out even the smallest cries. I took out my shortsword and cut their throats one by one, quickly moving through the brush and counting as I went.

“Fifteen. That’s everyone.” I dispatched the whole group, without exception, just as planned. They looked like fairly strong warriors—nothing compared to the Elite Five, though. This dark made for good cover. Not to mention...

“...You’re amazing, little buddy.”

A thin layer of Piggymaru’s body was spread across the soles of my shoes, forming a cushion to absorb the noise I would otherwise make moving through the forest. Piggymaru also helped by catching branches and anything else that might have given me away as I moved.

“You sure do make my job easier. You’re really proving to be a great partner, Piggymaru. Thanks.”

I stroked his tentacle, and the little slime squeaked happily.

Next up...

I heard a man’s voice echoing through the forest. I couldn’t make out what he was saying, but whatever it was, it was loud.

Probably someone from the main group with the torches—Muaji himself, even? Not that I even know if he’s here. No time to worry about that now, anyway. I have to finish them all quickly, no matter what...

“I’m going to destroy Ashint.”

After making sure that there was no one else nearby, I made a mental note of where I was in the forest, then returned to Seras.

The Ashint members were standing in a tight circle around her.

So he noticed the branches I left for them. Of course he noticed the branches—and that there was something suspicious about them. He assumed that they were a trap...meaning he didn't follow the trail I left behind me in the forest. My real aim, of course, was exactly that—to keep him out.

No one was moving, which meant the plan was working. I approached slowly, the man's voice getting clearer as I approached.

Is that Muaji talking to Seras?

My only orders to Seras had been to make it look like she wanted to lure him into the forest. After that, I just needed her to buy time however she saw fit.

From what I'm hearing, she's doing a good job. Muaji is a brilliant con man. He's smart and observant—but we can exploit that. I used the branches to make him uneasy and let him solve the mystery himself. He felt so satisfied after that, so confident in his abilities, that he stopped thinking straight.

I had to assume he was thinking something like, "Now it's my turn! I've seen through that miserable little girl's scheme, haven't I? What's left to fear?! I have strong men at my side, and more waiting in the woods to cut off her escape. Everything's going to plan..."

That's probably how he feels right now. I can tell by the way he's talking. He's so confident he's outwitted Seras that it's poisoning him, dulling his thinking to what's happening around him.

With Piggymaru's help, I scaled a nearby tree—the slime turned into a rope to help me up and muffled the sound of the branches as I climbed.

This little guy gets more useful every day.

I took up a position near the top of the tree and looked over at Seras and the men surrounding her. I was a little far away, just out of Paralyze range...but for my plan to work, I needed to be able to see every one of Muaji's men. At present, they were backing away from Seras, sensing some danger, but there was no sign that they planned to retreat.

They must think that at that distance, they couldn't possibly fall into an enemy's trap. Sorry to burst your bubble.

Given enough time to prepare, my status effect skills would be

able to reach all of them. I waited for the moon to show its face again before I made my move.

“Piggymaru, let’s link up,” I whispered.

I felt roots spreading out from the back of my head and crawling out across my cheeks on both sides of my face. I continued to listen to Muaji and Seras’s conversation as I began the process of pouring mana into my new form.

I reflected on everything I’d just heard—Muaji’s explanation of his plans to Seras. That cursed magic was just poison, like I thought.

There was one thing that surprised me—that Seras revealed her true identity to them. The effect was immediate; every Ashint member focused entirely on her. Even at a distance, I could see how absorbed they were in watching the high elf Princess Knight, Seras Ashrain, bathed in the moonlight. Even Muaji was overcome by her appearance.

Darkness fell over the forest once more. The tree branches creaked gently.

I asked her to buy us some time, but she’s really taking a risk by revealing herself here.

My mouth curled into a half-smile.

“She’s doing so well, out there all on her own.”

I drew in a deep breath before shouting my order across the trees.

“Assault Accel!”

Immediately, Seras began to glow, and the Ashint members were engulfed in a beam of light. The power of the spirit of light filled the forest like a flare.

I see them all.

Whoosh!

I sent my tentacles shooting out towards Ashint. Some of them tried to flee, but the majority were still rooted to the spot, unable to comprehend the sudden ambush that was taking place. Muaji’s self-satisfied expression was gone in an instant, replaced with one of pure astonishment.

It’s too late.

I had to make sure that not a single one of them got away. That

was why I had to crush the other group that Muaji left lurking in the forest. After seeing the demise of the main group, they would've disappeared in all directions and been impossible to track down.

"Status Open."

I opened the display gauge showing my remaining MP.

"Why don't I show you a *real* curse?"

I was locked on to all of them now.

"Paralyze."

After firing off my skill, I climbed down and went to join Seras. In front of us were the Paralyzed Ashint members, including the brothers Muaji had bragged about, and of course, Muaji himself.

"I guess they didn't think the enemy's attacks could reach them here," I said to Seras.

They must've figured that if the enemy could attack, they would've done so already. Muaji thought he was out of range of any trap—he never imagined that we were just buying time.

"This power takes a little time to prepare, see."

I severed the link with Piggymaru.

"Wh-where...are the o-others..." said Muaji, struggling to speak.

"I already took care of them. All fifteen, while you were over here running your mouth."

"Nh, ghh...? What did you j— What a-are y-you..."

"Poison."

Garbled screams filled the air as Muaji turned purple and his skin began to bubble. I quickly counted the men around him, all of them in similar death throes.

"So this is all thirty. I can't sense anyone else nearby..." Nobody except Eve and Lis behind me, hiding in the forest. "Eve's amazing. Leopardman ears are really something..." I shrugged. "I guess now we just wait for these guys to die of Poison, then."

There was no need to speak with Ashint or listen to anything they had to say. I knew how evil they were—killing them didn't trouble me in the slightest.

“Excuse me...” Seras sounded uncertain.

“Hm?”

“Did I live up to your expectations?”

“Yeah, you did really well. It was bold of you to reveal your true identity to them like that.”

She looked remorseful.

“I’m so sorry... I shouldn’t have decided to do so without consulting you first.”

“Hey, I was giving you a compliment.”

Seras squeaked, then covered her mouth and looked away awkwardly.

“I’m sorry, I spoke too soon. I thought you were about to scold me.”

I smiled at her. “I was right to trust you with this,” I said. I thought back to the orders I’d given her. She understood exactly what I wanted and measured out her strategy perfectly. She did more than enough—all for my sake.

Seras’s expression softened, and she breathed a sigh of relief.

“Thank you,” she said, bowing her head slightly. “I’m glad to have been of help. Everything went exactly as you said it would.”

“I just led him into a trap by leaving a false trail I knew he wouldn’t follow and used his own confidence against him. Looks like he fell for it, hard.”

He told Seras he was buying time, didn’t he? Sounded really happy about it too. Shame he wasn’t the only one stalling.

Muaji’s flaw was his failure to look out for the larger possibilities.

“Seras, can you go tell Eve and Lis what’s going on? I’d like you back here as soon as possible.”

“Understood. You can count on me.” With that, she disappeared into the trees.

That was step one accomplished.

“Next...”

They’re here. The first group that chased after our horses.

I could see their lights coming this way. Seras's flare must've brought them galloping back to help out. Which was a relief—this wouldn't have worked if they hadn't come back. My grand plan was nearing completion.

"Piggymaru, we're linking again."

"Squee! ...Squee?"

"Hm? What's wrong?"

"Sq— Squee..."

The little slime sounded deflated.

"You mean...you can't manage another?"

"Squ... Squee..."

I had mana to spare, but it seemed like it was taking more of a toll on Piggymaru than I'd expected. This was the first time we'd tried to do it twice in a row, after all.

"Sorry. I didn't think about how much this was taking out of you."

Linking myself with Piggymaru used a huge amount of mana, even when we weren't moving or walking around, and it really strained me. I always knew it was tough on the slime too, but since he never showed how tired he was, I never noticed *how* tough.

"I'm sorry I didn't notice sooner, buddy."

"Squ?! Squee~!" Piggymaru's squeaks sounded apologetic, like he desperately wanted to reassure me.

"Squeeee..."

"Hey, don't worry about it. I'm not mad or anything. I figured we could use this ability as long as I still had the MP, but I was wrong, that's all."

"So you *are* wrong sometimes," said Eve, walking towards me with Seras at her side.

Didn't I ask her to tell Eve what was going on...?

"I'm so sorry," said Seras, "but she wishes to speak to you."

Lis was behind them.

"I've been briefed. Allow me to support you," said Eve, stepping forward.

“It’s fine. Seras and I can handle it.”

“Seras appears tired.”

Going toe-to-toe with Muaji and keeping her cool with all the Ashint aiming poisoned arrows at her must have been pretty rough on her.

“I can step forward and protect you here,” said Eve. “I’m fully mentally and physically prepared to do so and, more than anything else, I...I cannot abide having you two do battle on my behalf.”

The strongest bloodsport gladiator and a tired Seras, huh? I’d planned for Eve to help out a little later, but...

“Fine. I accept your offer.”

“Thank you.”

“But this will have all been for nothing if I lose my guide to the Forbidden Witch. Just keep that in mind, okay?”

“Retreat immediately from any and all danger. Of course,” said Eve dryly.

“Thanks for understanding. Seras, you’re protecting Lis, then.”

“Understood. Leave it to me, Eve,” said Seras.

“Hmph. Are you okay, Too-ka?” asked Eve.

“Probably fine, yeah.”

I can’t use my long-distance attacks with Piggymaru right now, but my status effect skills still work fine. It’s not like we’re going up against the Elite Five or anything. I’ve got stat boosts from all the leveling up I’ve done to get here too.

“E-excuse me...” Lis spoke hesitantly, and Seras crouched down to attend to her.

“What’s the matter, Lis?”

“If Mr. Too-ka needs your strength, then please leave me and fight alongside him...”

“...Lis?”

“I know that we need to go see the Forbidden Witch, and I’m the only one who can’t help us get there... I can’t fight, and I’m just slowing you down, so...” Lis closed her eyes tight and clenched her hands at her sides. “I don’t want...Mr. Too-ka and big sister to be put in d-danger because of some—some *nothing* like me...”

Seras patted her on the shoulder, kindness in her eyes.

"I understand. Thank you for being so considerate."

Lis must've built up so much courage to say that—and Seras is trying to accept her feelings for the sacrifice they are, not deny them.

Lis's eyes filled with tears.

She's a good kid.

Eve looked worried, and I pulled her aside, out of earshot of the others.

"Don't worry," I said quietly, "Seras isn't actually going to leave her unprotected."

I told Seras to take Lis further into the forest to hide her, and Eve and I waited to ambush the soldiers who were coming our way. We'd found a small clearing that seemed like a promising place—for my plan to work, we needed to kill every last one of this first group. We couldn't afford to get drawn into the forest, where we might lose sight of one of them in the fighting. We'd have to make our ambush here.

"I'll draw them away. You can hide yourself in the brush and paralyze them with your power once they're all in range," said Eve.

I nodded. What better decoy than the person they were pursuing?

"Is there anyone in the baron's guard I should watch out for?" I asked.

"Some of them are especially tough. One in particular, the head of his personal guard, is a man by the name of Costello," answered Eve.

"He's strong?"

"He's rumored to be successor to the Dragonslayer in Monroy. He used to be one of the Monster Slayer Knights, I hear."

I'm not really sure how strong the Dragonslayer is, to be honest.

"How would you fare against him?"

"There are many who were going to pay good money to know the answer to that question. We've never fought, so I don't know his true strength."

"An unknown, then..."

"Hmph. But from what I saw of that first group as they galloped by, he wasn't with them... Hm?"

Eve's ears pricked up. I turned to look back into the forest, away from the ever-approaching lights.

"A third group, huh?"

Their torches appeared in small clusters, racing towards us through the forest.

"They might be moving a little slower than the others, but Seras's light must be drawing them towards us too."

The first group was still bearing down on us—just like the second group of Ashint, trying to find Eve as fast as possible and prove their worth.

In this situation, who would move slowly? Who doesn't need acclaim or rewards? Well, the one they're all trying to impress doesn't...

"If the baron himself is on the hunt, he's probably part of the third group," I said.

Judging by their speed and distance, the first group was going to get to us ahead of the third...which was good. If both of them reached us at the same time, the confusion might've made it easier for some to escape.

"We'll have to crush them, one after the other. Eve, let's take out the first group."

Eve drew her sword. "Understood."

"I don't want to let any of them get away. Try to lure them towards you before fighting them if you can."

"I'll do my best."

I'd counted the enemies in the first group when we watched them pass us from the shadows earlier. They'd joined up with the others right before our eyes.

That should be all of them.

"Can you confirm how many there are in the first group?"

Eve listened for a moment, then nodded. "Just as you expected—the same as before."

Good, just as I thought, they haven't divided their forces like Muaji did—they're all just charging at us headfirst.

The sound of hooves grew louder and louder—they were almost

upon us.

“We’ve finally found you, Eve Speed! Unlucky for you! We saw right through your decoy horses! You aren’t getting away this time!” shouted one of the riders.

I took a deep breath to steady myself.

“...Saw through it, eh? That’s pretty rich, coming from you.”

The man now noticed the mountain of corpses surrounding us.

“Mh?! Are those Ashint members?! Pfha ha hah! Their curses were a sham after all! I *hated* those guys!”

“The baron is gonna be real mad! ‘Bring me the bloody corpse of the leopardman!’ he says... That’s all that’s gonna make him happy now!” another man chimed in behind him.

“Things are going our way for once! Get a move on—we can’t let the personal guard steal all the glory, can we?! ”

“Wah ha ha ha! Thanks for running, subhuman! We never could stand a monster like you stealing all the glory.”

Eve was silent.

“Cat got your tongue?! I heard leopardmen were wild—are there too many of us for you to handle?”

The man spurred his horse to charge at Eve, sword high above his head to swing down at her.

“You’re miiiiine!”

“All right,” I whispered to myself. *You’re all in range.*

I emerged from the brush with my hand out, making sure to keep every single target in range.

“Paralyze.”

“Nh... Huh?! ”

The soldiers and their horses were completely frozen, still as statues. The man who’d attacked Eve still had his sword in the air, his face twisted in a battle cry.

“Wh... Uh, I can’t move...?”

“Wh-what... Th-that man...?”

“Poison.”

The men began to groan, their shrieks of pain stifled by their paralysis.

This Paralyze-Poison combo is really convenient... They work perfectly together, and the range and targeting overlap so well.

“Too-ka,” said Eve.

“Yeah, I know.”

This isn't over yet.

I could hear hoofbeats and angry voices from the other direction and turned to face them. The third group was almost upon us.

“He’s here,” Eve whispered, almost to herself.

That must mean...

“There’s nowhere left for you to run, you blasted subhuman ingrate! Did you really think you could escape me? Make me look like a fool?! Idiot! Did you really think you would get away?!”

“Baron Zuan.”

Eve bared her fangs and growled like a beast.

The baron was acting like his victory was assured—he didn’t even seem to notice that the soldiers of the first group were paralyzed.

He must think they're blocking our retreat—that's how this looks to him.

“Too-ka, do you see that man next to the baron?” said Eve.

I followed her eyeline to a large heavy-built man sitting on a huge horse. He wore an imposing helmet and rugged armor. In his hands, he held a sledgehammer.

“That’s Costello?”

Eve grunted in agreement.

Costello smiled widely and swung his hammer above his head in well-practiced motions.

“Rejoice, Eve Speed! The baron has prepared a pike outside the colosseum for your head! We’ll raise the girl wrapped in your hide and decorated with your bones, and we’ll keep her safe in our beds! Bah ha ha! You can be with her forever, just like you always wanted, eh?!” boomed Costello.

Baron Zuan's mouth curled into a sadistic smile.

"And when I tire of her, I'll sell her to a brothel. Hah ha ha ha! A leopard-skinned beauty will really bring in the customers!" he sneered.

Man, these guys come up with the scummiest ideas.

The baron suddenly realized that something wasn't right. "What's this...? Those purple-robed men down there... Ashint?! And the soldiers blocking your path—"

Eve prepared to launch herself towards the enemies. I deselected her on my target screen and fired off a skill.

"Paralyze."

But...

Target limit had been reached

80/80

The third group didn't stop moving.

Target limit...?

"..."

I thought back on my time in this new world. *I've never applied my skills to more than eighty targets before, have I...? Not with the lizardmen, not even against the Black Dragon Knights.*

When the first group returned, I had to Paralyze them, horses and all, because I didn't want their horses to bolt and carry them too far from the battlefield. And the Ashint group that I'd already paralyzed...

"I've never used my skills on this many targets before."

Some of Ashint must've still been alive. As far as I could tell, none of the third group had been successfully paralyzed.

I looked at my status effect screen and saw new details appearing there.

The mana cost didn't appear until I actually cast each spell—I guess these target limits don't appear until I hit them, either... Are all my skills limited to eighty targets?

The only target limit on display was for my Freeze skill, as it had

always been.

There's so much I still don't know about these status effect skills. I guess I have to accept that there's a learning curve to actually using them.

I stuck out my hand towards the baron's men again.

"Dark."

Paralyze isn't my only skill.

Costello's expression changed in an instant.

"Wh-?! Whaaaaaat?! My eyes?!"

Fwhoosh.

"Ugh! Gh...nh?!"

Eve sliced his throat with a flash of her sword.

"Unfortunate that we never got to face each other one on one, Costello," said Eve. She immediately threw herself at another of the mounted men.

"Gh... Gah..."

Costello dropped his hammer and fell from the saddle, clawing desperately at the blood pouring from his neck.

"Wh-Wh-What did you do?! Costello, what's the matter with you?! What did you do, cretin?! What's wrong with my men over there?! What have you done to—"

"Baron!" one of his men interrupted, "please, retreat behind us! We'll take care of that savage beast!"

The baron ground his teeth. "Did you kill all the Ashint already?! Tch! They told me they'd have something for me if I came north—and this is what I get?! I believed them because they killed the Elite Five, but now they're dead on the ground?! Useless! Worthless to me!"

"Baron, please! Leave this to us. Worry not for your safety! These others may have failed you, but we are here, your personal guard! We'll gladly demonstrate your might by bathing ourselves in the blood of anyone foolish enough to rebel against you!"

"Yes, very well! Stop them in their tracks! Whoever kills the leopard can be the next head of my personal guard! Curse you, Costello! Was there sand in your eyes?! Fool! You overconfident brute!"

The baron continued to rage as he retreated behind his men. As

soon as their leader was behind them, they advanced on us.

“Berserk.”

“Gaaaaaaaahhhhh!”

One of the men jumped from his saddle and attacked the man next to him.

“Wh-?! G-get off me! What are you doing?! Gyaaahh!” The arrogance from a moment ago was gone, replaced by confusion.

I can't use Paralyze anymore, so the regular combo isn't going to work... That doesn't mean I can't fight, though.

“Hah ha hah! I'm going to take the leopardman's head, then I'll be the nex—”

“Berserk.”

“Ghaaa!”

“Agh! What's gotten into you?! Wh—?! Stop it!”

One of the most important factors in a battle is strength in numbers, and the confidence that can give one side or the other. We were outnumbered, and they assumed it meant they had the upper hand. Costello's death and my skills changed the equation, though, and there was fear spreading through their ranks.

“Eve!” She was fiercely cutting down another of the baron's men. “Don't worry about me! Kill the ones that try to escape, that's what's most important now!”

Eve picked up a spear that had fallen at her feet.

“Understood!”

She tossed the spear at a man who was spurring his horse away, launching it through the air like an arrow. The man slumped in his saddle, skewered like a piece of meat.

“Ghh! Curse you, Eve! I'll give *such* a reward to the one who kills her! Women! Land! Anything you want! Avenge my good name and kill her!”

The baron's eyes were bloodshot as he screamed, increasingly incoherent.

Looked like he hadn't even considered pulling back. Just like the rumors said—he was a real hothead. He lost all reason when he thought

someone was making him look foolish. There were no signs that he'd try to retreat any time soon...perfect.

"Let's keep him angry for now."

Upon hearing the baron's orders, some of the men had charged wildly. They didn't look like part of his personal guard—no uniforms, and different attitudes.

"Whoaa! Them personal guard ain't nothing special, are they?! Why'd we gotta sit back and watch them fight? They've tired out the target for us—let's get this done!"

A wave of hired mercenaries came charging towards us. As far as I could tell, they didn't have a coherent strategy. Instead, they tried to outmaneuver each other and reach Eve first.

More good news for us.

"We get to make money killing people, *and* make a name doing it?! This job is the best!"

Several of the mercenaries charged toward Eve, but she kept her focus on the ones that were trying to run. I knew she wouldn't be able to keep track of the runners if these new attackers got in her way.

"Berserk."

I cast my skill on one of the mercenaries, who turned and cut down the man next to him.

"Take th—ghhaaa!"

"Hey! Kill anyone who goes crazy, no hesitation! That guy in the robe's the one behind it. Seems like he can only affect a few at a time, though! Kill the robed guy first!"

That one's smart to figure me out so quickly.

I looked at the frozen Ashint members on the ground. They were slowly succumbing to Poison.

"Status Open."

I opened my skill window and looked at Paralyze to check that the limit was no longer capped, then held out my hand towards the advancing mercenaries.

"Paralyze. Poison." A few of the mercenaries sputtered and choked.

“You idiots, don’t be scared!” the baron called out from the rear. “Look! There’s a limit to the number of people he can affect with his powers! If you rush him together, he won’t be able to deal with you all at once! Go! Make a name for yourself here, and there’s a life in the lap of luxury waiting for you! Gooooo!”

I froze one after another, but the men kept coming, unafraid.

Do they think that fewer mercenaries on the field means more chances for glory or something? They’re reckless idiots.

I continued using Paralyze, Dark and Berserk to hold them off. A terrified, riderless horse galloped through the battlefield, and two men jumped out from its shadow, closing in on me.

“All right, we’ve got ’im now!”

“That money and land are ours! Hya ha ha ha!”

I held out both arms. At this distance I’d have to use Sleep to—
Thunk! Spurt!

Twin arrows pierced the skulls of my attackers. I looked in the direction the arrows had come from—the thick of the forest.

Seras. She was covering me from the shadows, using a bow she picked up from one of the Ashint.

I was grateful for the assistance, and curious about Seras’s skills as an archer—elves in fiction from back home were often skilled with bows, after all. Was the same true in this world?

I used the opening Seras gave me to clean up the mercenaries attacking Eve. I strode across the clearing, poisoning the fallen mercenaries and guards as I went. One of the baron’s personal guard was trying to escape into the forest.

“Dark.”

“...Eh? Aaah!”

The man tumbled from his horse and onto all fours in the mud.

“Hyaah! Help m—ghh?!”

Baron Zuan rode by and thrust his spear into his own guard’s back.

“N-n-no escape, you coward! I won’t allow it! Call yourself a soldier? Disrespect the honor of serving in my guard?! Fool! First my

leopardman deserts me, and now my personal guard dare to do the same?! I won't have it! I won't!"

He was consumed by his rage, his sanity giving way to frenzied anger. Many of the men looked too scared of him to run.

We were right to leave him alive.

"What are you idiots doing?! Kill that robed man! I don't know what he's doing, but he's the cause of all this madness! Kill him! He thinks he can make a fool of me? Listen here, I am a baron! Everything will go exactly as I've planned it! Everything must go to plan, do you hear me?!"

I don't need to cast berserk on him, he's crazy enough already.

"Too-ka," said Eve.

"What's up?"

"I have to thank you. Since becoming a bloodsport gladiator, I have only fought to create a spectacle—you couldn't truly call it battle at all. I used to want to give it all up."

"Used to? Have you changed your mind?"

Eve kicked up a sword that was lying at her feet, catching it easily and throwing it at a nearby guard, impaling him.

"Yes. I don't fully understand it, but I feel happy, somehow, fighting like this."

Eve let out a howl up into the night sky, beastly and fierce, yet...it sounded like a celebration. The remainder of the baron's guard froze in fear for a moment, and Eve charged them like a hurricane, slashing at them with her blade.

The night was filled with blood and screaming.

"Oh man..."

It was the first time I'd seen her fight, and it was a terrifying thing to behold. She wasn't as strong as Civit, of course, but who could be? Eve could've given the Elite Five a run for their money, though.

Her fighting style was captivating, so much so that it took me a while to notice—

"Ghh! Curse you! Curse you! You imbeciles!"

Only the baron remained. The veins on his forehead were bulging,

and his whole body was trembling with fury.

I guess he's finally realized what's happening here.

Everyone except the baron was dead or dying. I moved around the battlefield, counting the corpses and poisoning any that were still breathing. The baron began to struggle with his horse, still impotently raging. He was like a child having a tantrum. He spurred his horse to turn and screamed at us resentfully.

"I'll remember this! I'll retreat for now, but you'll never get away with this, hear me?! It'll be a brutal and bloody end for the both of you, just you w—"

"Paralyze. Are you stupid?" I said, exasperated. "What won't we get away with? Did you really think we were just going to let you ride off?"

Why would he think we would let him go? He really believes everything is going to go his way, even now. He pretends the things he dislikes don't exist and uses violence and political power to keep them out of sight and out of mind.

"You know, you might've survived if you had the courage to face reality."

I turned to look at Eve.

"I understand that you'll want to hear him beg for his life, but keep it short," I told her. Eve didn't respond.

"If you don't want to do it yourself, I can—"

"No. I need to do it."

"Okay. Come find me when you're done."

Eve nodded once, then walked over to the baron, gripping the hilt of her sword tightly. I continued to count the corpses.

I could hear the baron's fear spilling out in stifled whimpers.

"I'm glad you can't talk. You can't deceive me with your words anymore. I'm a simple person like that, right?" I'd never heard Eve's voice like that before, cold and sharp as ice. "I might have been willing to forgive you if you just came for me, but I never imagined you'd try to touch the girl. You made a grave mistake."

The baron made a choking sound.

“Your tears won’t save you now. Goodbye.”

There was a brief shriek, and then nothing.

She said goodbye, but was it to the baron himself? Or was it to the naïve past she’s leaving behind?

I kept working, counting corpses and making sure they were all dead, until I heard Eve’s footsteps stop a few paces behind me.

“Did you finish it?”

“Yes.”

She looked like a weight had been lifted off her shoulders. Seras came out of the trees leading Lis by the hand.

“Sir Too-ka.”

She wasn’t disguised anymore—it took a lot out of her to keep it up, and there was no point when all the witnesses were dead.

She scanned the battlefield. “It looks like you’re done.”

Lis was hiding behind Seras, holding on to her clothes.

“Lis, if you don’t want to see the bodies—”

“I-It’s fine...”

“Are you sure?”

“I saw so many when I traveled with big sister... The people who attacked us on the road...”

Not the first time she’s seen death... She’s still trembling, though. It’s not the kind of thing I want her getting used to looking at.

“Seras, I’ve got a little more work to do with Eve here. Can you take Lis and get us ready to leave?”

“Of course. We’ll return to the luggage and try to secure some of the horses for our journey.”

“Thanks. Oh, and...”

“Yes?”

“Thanks for covering me earlier—with the bow, I mean.”

Seras nodded, looking relieved. “I was worried you would be displeased, since you hadn’t ordered me to do so.”

“I already told you, right? I trust your judgement.”

She closed her eyes, taking in what I had just said.

“Thank you...” she replied, placing a hand on her chest.

“You’re vice-captain of this mercenary band we’ve put together. When I can’t give the orders, it’s up to you to take over. You two are fine with that, aren’t you?” I said, turning to Eve and Lis.

Eve *hmp*hed in agreement.

“Y-yes!”

“I look forward to working with you both!” said Seras, smiling.

“Oh, and Seras,” I added.

“Yes?”

“Before you get us ready to leave, could you bring me the hammer from my bag? I’m going to need it later. Just leave it lying somewhere I can see it.”

“Of course.”

Once we’d decided where we’d meet once our work was over, Seras and Lis headed into the forest.

“Um...excuse me, Miss Seras?” said Lis uncertainly.

“What’s the matter?”

“I-I... I want to help.” Her voice was trembling. “When Mr. Too-ka said we were a band of mercenaries, he included me, so...”

“Lis?”

“I want to be useful to you...” Lis looked like she was about to cry, and Seras patted her gently on the head.

“I understand. Do you mind helping me carry the luggage, then?”

“O-of course...! Thank you, Miss Seras...”

They walked off into the trees together.

Lis is afraid of expressing her opinion—she thinks it’s wrong to talk about the things she wants. People like that tavern owner deny children their own thoughts. They expect them to silently do as they’re told, and scold them without ever asking for their side of the story. Eventually, the kids think they’re doing something wrong every time they express themselves. Lis’s emotional scars run deep.

“Eve.”

“What is it?”

“Be patient and give her time when you help her heal, will you?”

“Of course, that’s my plan anyway... My thickheadedness played a part in it, after all.”

I watched the trees that Seras and Lis had just disappeared behind.

“Seras can help too, while we’re on the road.”

“Yeah... Thank you, Too-ka.”

“So what do you need help with?” asked Eve.

The area around us was littered with corpses. From my quick count, nobody had escaped. Those I had poisoned lay at our feet.

“Look at this, Eve,” I said, pulling something out of my backpack.

“Is that...ice?” she asked. Eve examined the small lump of ice I held up for her to see. “It looks like there’s an insect in there...”

“Yeah. I froze a living insect with my Freeze skill.”

My Freeze skill was a little different from the others. Its target limit was 3, and the display currently read 2/3. Pretty low compared to my other skills.

Freeze was a non-lethal skill that could be stacked with other effects. It lasted three hundred days and couldn’t be dispelled.

It was tough to figure this one out...

I placed the frozen insect on a rock in front of me.

“Eve, will you try to break this with the sledgehammer over there? Like you’re trying to turn the ice into snow.”

“What? You want me to go all out against this little bug?”

“Yeah.”

“...Understood.”

Eve picked up the sledgehammer Costello had dropped minutes earlier and swung down on the frozen insect.

It looks so light in her hands... Eve is really strong.

Swoosh! Clink!

“Nh?!”

Eve looked confused, as if she'd struck something she didn't quite expect.

“It's strangely tough,” she growled, “I swung with all my might. My aim was true, but...this is no ordinary ice.”

“That's right. It isn't ordinary ice.” I picked up the frozen insect. “When you Freeze a living target, it becomes impossible to break it apart.”

This insect was from the first time I tested Freeze on a target. No matter what I did, the ice wouldn't break. I even tried melting it in the fire—nothing worked. This insect would probably stay frozen for the whole three hundred days.

“Now try to smash this one.”

Eve looked at me warily as I placed an identical-looking lump of ice on the rock in front of her.

“...It looks the same as the other one,” she said.

“Just try it.”

“Very well. I expect you have something in mind.” Eve swung again.

She hit such a small target perfectly twice in a row. Her accuracy is incredible...

Crack!

“Something felt different that time...”

She raised the hammer slowly. The ice underneath had, in the most literal sense of the phrase, been reduced to dust.

“This is...? What was special about the first lump of ice?”

“My Freeze skill can be used on objects too. That's the difference.”

“But it was the same insect both times, wasn't it?”

“It was the same type of insect, yes. But there was an important difference between them: life and death.”

“Hmh?”

“I froze the first while it was still alive, and the second after it had died. Corpses are considered objects, which means they can be

destroyed.”

I pinched some of the powdered ice in my fingertips.

“And also, when the corpses are destroyed, they turn into this powder and just float away, you know? Like dust in the wind.”



It all happened when we were staying in the tavern in Monroy. I wanted to test a theory that had been on my mind for some time.

This Freeze skill can't be dispelled for three hundred days...but can the ice itself be destroyed?

I tried to destroy the first insect I froze with a small hammer but couldn't even chip it—clearly it wasn't normal ice. I tried my best, but nothing would melt or break it. I wondered if it might be similar to the ice that covers Seras's sword when she uses her spirit armor.

Back to the drawing board... I thought with a sigh.

I walked over to the window of the tavern and stared out, thinking. A splinter of wood from the window frame caught my eye.

Wait a minute... I can use this skill on objects too, right? I haven't tried that yet.

My skill's target limit was 3, and if I froze the splinter, I'd only have one open spot left.

“Well, it's worth a shot. I need to experiment sooner or later...”

I froze the splinter and tried to smash it with the hammer. It crumbled to a dust as fine as flour.

“Splinters don't break apart like this. Did Freeze cause this, somehow?”

Soon, I formed a working theory.

Humans, animals, insects...they're all living things as far as Freeze is concerned. Plants, dirt and stones are all object targets. Animate things can't be destroyed...but inanimate objects can.

“Status Open.”

Looking at my skill screen, I could see that my target limit was

back down to 1/3.

“So when the target is destroyed, it resets this.”

Everything’s coming together now. I might be able to make this work.

I walked outside to find a dead insect. Eventually I found one, identical to the first. I froze it and hit it with my hammer.



“And, well, you can probably guess...”

“You destroyed it?” asked Eve.

“Yeah.”

Eve growled disdainfully.

“Hmph... I understand that the strength of the ice changes depending on the target, but what are you planning on using that for?”

“I’ve been thinking about how to dispose of these corpses.”

With a start, Eve realized what I was getting at. “So you’re going to Freeze these corpses, and...”

“Yeah.”

With this skill, I could dispose of corpses without a trace. Eve still looked skeptical, though.

“But I’m not sure... Do you really think we need to? Why not just leave the corpses and run?”

“It’s a fair question.” I looked down at Muaji’s corpse. “These corpses here are the curse mages who took down the Elite Five, right?”

“Yes? I still don’t see what you’re getting at.”

“I’m going to pin the death of the Elite Five on these Ashint guys—permanently.”

The Ashint corpses would be turned to dust, and the truth would vanish into darkness—dead men tell no tales. No one would ever know if Ashint really killed the Elite Five, and Ashint would never be able to confirm or deny the charge. The only witnesses to the Elite Five’s downfall were Seras and I—nobody else alive knew the truth of what happened that day.

The world would continue to think it was possible that Ashint did the deed. As long as Ashint themselves couldn't disavow it, the possibility would always remain, and it would seem even more likely when no new suspects appeared. The case would stay unsolved forever.

"The curse mages who bragged about killing the Elite Five suddenly disappear one day, never to be seen again. Anyone who wants to solve the mystery of the Elite Five's defeat will be left chasing down witnesses that don't exist. This myth of the disappearance of Ashint will be a smokescreen for us."

I never expected Ashint to work as decoys for long...I always figured I'd eventually have to reveal myself to the world. But now, if this all goes off without a hitch, they can be my scapegoats for eternity.

Baron Zuan's corpse, all his personal guard and hired mercenaries—I might be able to pin these on Ashint too. Did Ashint join forces with the runaway Eve Speed? Was there a disagreement between Ashint and the baron's men? Nobody will ever know for sure.

I explained all my thinking to Eve.

"But still, I can't think of a good reason Ashint would help you escape. An internal dispute or betrayal is a more likely story—and it'll draw the attention off you, as well."

"I see. That explains why you didn't want to let anyone escape during the fight—it would be difficult to pull this off if any witnesses got away."

"Yeah. I kinda figured we could cross that bridge if we came to it. This plan wasn't likely to succeed, anyway. It was only because of you and Seras that we kept anyone from escaping."

Even if the plan hadn't worked, I figured that after crushing the baron's main forces, we wouldn't have had any trouble riding straight for the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters.

"Wait a minute for me, Eve."

Seras brought over the item I'd asked for—a medium-weight hammer with a long handle.

I was planning on having Eve use this one, but I guess now I can help out too.

"Thanks to Costello, we've got two of these to work with. Let's split up and crush the bodies. To be honest, this isn't going to be

pretty... Are you up for it, Eve?"

I couldn't exactly ask Seras and Lis to do this stuff—it's not something I wanted them to see. Eve snorted at me.

"I've seen so much gore and death in the colosseum it practically bores me now. My hands are already stained from so much blood. You don't need to worry about me," she replied.

"That's good to hear."

I swung the hammer over my shoulder.

"If you sense anyone nearby let me know, okay? I don't want anyone to see us doing this. There's a possibility the baron has a fourth group of men moving in on us. If worse comes to worst, we just need to make sure Muaji and some key Ashint members have disappeared."

That'd make it look like some Ashint members were killed by the baron's men. We could stab or otherwise injure the ones that died from my Poison skill to make it look more natural.

"Understood," replied Eve, nodding.

"Let's get to work."

In the end, since it was late at night and we were far from the city, we weren't interrupted. We turned to make our way back to Seras and Lis after crushing all the Ashint corpses to dust. Crushing the corpses taught me a few things about Freeze—bodies were very different from small splinters of wood, and objects that were harder to begin with were more difficult to turn to dust.

I can't turn just anything to dust with this ability...

The clouds had begun growling forebodingly. Hopefully it would start to rain, washing all this scattered "dust" away.

As we walked away, I turned back for a moment to look at the battlefield. Ashint were gone now.

"*Nobody can prove our curses don't exist.*" Isn't that what Muaji said to Seras?

"He was right," I whispered to myself, "nobody can even prove *you* exist anymore."

Chapter 5: Good Night

EVE AND I MET up with Seras and Lis at our meeting spot.

“Welcome back, Sir Too-ka,” said Seras.

“This should keep any suspicions about the demise of the Elite Five off of us,” I said.

“You mean that everything went to plan?”

“Yeah. Never thought it’d work out this well, to be honest.”

Lis rushed over to Eve. “Big sister!” she cried happily.

“Did you run into any problems while we were away?” Eve asked her.

“No... Miss Seras has been looking after me so well...”

“Lis was a huge help with the bags. She really did a lot!” said Seras.

“Miss Seras...” Lis was holding back tears.

Must be a long time since anybody’s complimented her like that. I could easily imagine how the owner of that tavern treated her before we arrived to get her—never encouraging her or praising her in any way.

Lis approached me hesitantly, carefully lined up her feet, straightened her back, and bowed deeply.

“Th-thank you so much. I-if you hadn’t saved us, Mr. Too-ka, then...big sister and I w-would be—”

“Don’t worry about it.” I didn’t want to think about where they would be.

Lis raised her head slowly, like she was worried about seeming rude.

“Is there something you want to ask me?”

“Ehm, well...”

“Go ahead, I won’t bite.”

“I-is Piggymaru okay...?” she asked, finally building up the courage.

At the sound of his name, the little slime poked a tentacle out from the neck of my robes.

Slower than usual... Must be tired after all that fighting.

Piggymaru squeaked and stretched a tentacle out to Lis, who stroked it gently.

“Miss Seras told me you were fighting too, Piggymaru...”

“Squee.”

“Thank you.”

“Squeeeeee~! ♪♪”

The slime turned light pink.

“When she’s petting Piggymaru like that, it’s like she forgets to be anxious about everything,” said Seras. “Piggymaru really is amazing.”

Maybe this little slime can help heal the scars on her heart.

The horses we used as decoys had run off, so we would need to use some of the baron’s if we wanted to keep riding. Seras had already prepared two of them and loaded them with our bags.

“If only we had an item that would give us infinite storage,” I said to myself, pulling out my pouch. We found gold, gemstones, and jewelry scattered across the battlefield and took whatever was light enough to carry.

“All right, let’s get going,” I said.

Eve and Lis settled easily onto their horse. I mounted the other, clinging to Seras from behind.

“Sorry to make you do this just because I can’t ride.”

“Oh no, don’t let that bother you! Everybody has strengths and weaknesses. I’m happy to be of use to you, in any case.”

Eve spurred her horse into a trot, but ours didn’t budge.

“Seras?”

“Sorry, Sir Too-ka. Do you mind holding on a little tighter? I’m worried you might fall off.”

“...Sure.”

I squeezed tight, holding firmly to Seras and drawing our bodies closer together.

Seras let out a stifled whimper.

“Too tight?”

Did I squeeze too hard? My stats have really gone up recently, huh.

I loosened my grip a little.

“How’s this?”

“Y-yes...that’s much better. Thank you.”

The horse set off at a trot. The sound of the hooves filled my ears, and my body swayed awkwardly with the movement of the horse. I wasn’t anywhere near used to this yet.

“Sir Too-ka, you read our enemies perfectly yet again,” said Seras.

“I don’t know about that. If I’d been better prepared, I’d have known about Piggymaru’s stamina and the target limits on my other skills. I’m not as perfectly in control as you and Eve seem to think I am. Sometimes I’m just trying to keep my head above water.”

“But even when those things happen, you never hesitate. You handled them quickly, and...well, that’s why I feel so comfortable taking orders from you, Sir Too-ka.”

If the person giving the orders panics, it only makes the situation worse. I had to be as calm and clear as possible, no matter what came our way.

“S-so long as it’s you giving the orders, Master...I want to live up to your expectations.”

“Heh heh, that’s good to hear. Like I said, I can’t see the future or anything. I just try to predict it as best I can.”

“Then I, in turn, shall endeavor to be the best vice-captain to you that I can be.”

“You’re already doing more than enough, Seras. Don’t you remember how much I relied on you back in Monroy?”

“I’m happy to be of help! Even just helping you ride a horse as we’re doing now.”

“Hey, Seras...is riding something I could pick up easily? Could

you teach me?”

“If that’s what you want, I can show you the basics when we next have time.”

“Sure. We’re slower riding two to a horse, and it limits our mobility with both of us up here. And well, clinging on to you from behind every time we ride is a little...you know.”

“That part of it doesn’t concern me at all. If it was someone else, perhaps, but for you, Sir Too-ka...”

“I know you’re trying to make me feel better by saying that, but in the future, we really need to be able to ride separately.”

Seras was quiet for a few moments. “Of course, Master,” she said.

After a while it began to rain, slowly at first, but steadily increasing until it was pounding the sodden ground. We found a small cave and decided to take shelter there.

“I expected it from the look of the clouds, but it really has started coming down hard, hasn’t it?” said Seras. She and Lis wrung out their soaked clothes, and I handed them a dry cloth to use as a towel.

“Dry your hair—I don’t want either of you catching a cold. Wait, *can* elves catch colds?”

“Well, yes, we can catch colds,” replied Seras, pressing the cloth to her dripping hair. “It’s said that elves are less prone to sickness than humans, though. Humans are the race most likely to suffer from illness, I believe.”

Seras walked over and started drying my hair for me. She stood on her tiptoes to reach, smiling at me.

“You be careful about catching a cold too, okay?”

“Right. I will.”

If I got sick here and things took a turn for the worse... It doesn’t bear thinking about.

Seras looked out of the cave into the rainy forest beyond.

“Oh, you’re back,” she said.

“I was just tying up the horses,” said Eve, stopping just inside the cave. She shook herself wildly, shaking the water from her fur and sending droplets spraying onto the cave floor. “I tied them in the driest

spot I could find, under a little bit of an overhang. We should be able to get away in a hurry if anything happens.”

I handed her a dry cloth.

“Sorry to make you go out there,” I said.

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Once we’ve eaten, let’s take turns getting some rest,” I said.

“We’ve come a long way from Monroy and should really get some sleep. No point in rushing to the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters if we’re too tired to fight once we get there.”

Piggymaru poked out from inside my robes.

“Squee.”

The little slime drew up against a wall and started wobbling quietly. *Resting, I guess.* We decided to finish off any food in our packs that wouldn’t last the journey. Eve started a fire, and I made a stand for our small pot.

“Those clothes aren’t going to dry in time—you should really go and dry off. I’ll look the other way.”

“Understood. Come on, Lis, let’s go.”

“O-okay!”

Seras took Lis by the hand and led her into a dark corner of the cave.

SERAS ASHRAIN

LIS BEGAN TO STRIP down, and Seras wrung out the girl’s soaked clothes, heavy with rain. She squeezed the cloth in her hands tight, sending a stream of water spilling across the cave floor.

Seras then took off her armor piece by piece. Suddenly, she was aware that someone was watching her.

“Is something wrong?”

Lis’s cheeks turned bright red, and she looked down at the ground.

“Oh, I-I’m sorry.”

Seras looked away, searching her memory. She had a hunch about what was bothering Lis.

Was she just looking at my... Should I leave it alone? Her reaction worries me, though. I don't want her to feel any guilt.

She crouched down to Lis's eye level to speak with her.

"It's perfectly natural to be curious. Were you looking at my chest?"

"Ah—"

Lis was at a loss for words and cringed slightly, like she was afraid she'd done something wrong.

Seras laughed kindly.

Nothing compared to what happened to me outside those ruins in Mils...

"There's nothing to be embarrassed or shy about. Our bodies are nothing to be ashamed of. I don't mind if you look at my chest," she said kindly. She sighed inwardly, though, resigned to her fate.

There's nothing I can do about how large my chest is or the attention it draws... She glanced back at Too-ka on the other side of the cave. But the one person I do want paying attention never seems to.

Not when they had changed together at the inn in Monroy, nor when they rode together on horseback. He never appeared interested in her at all.

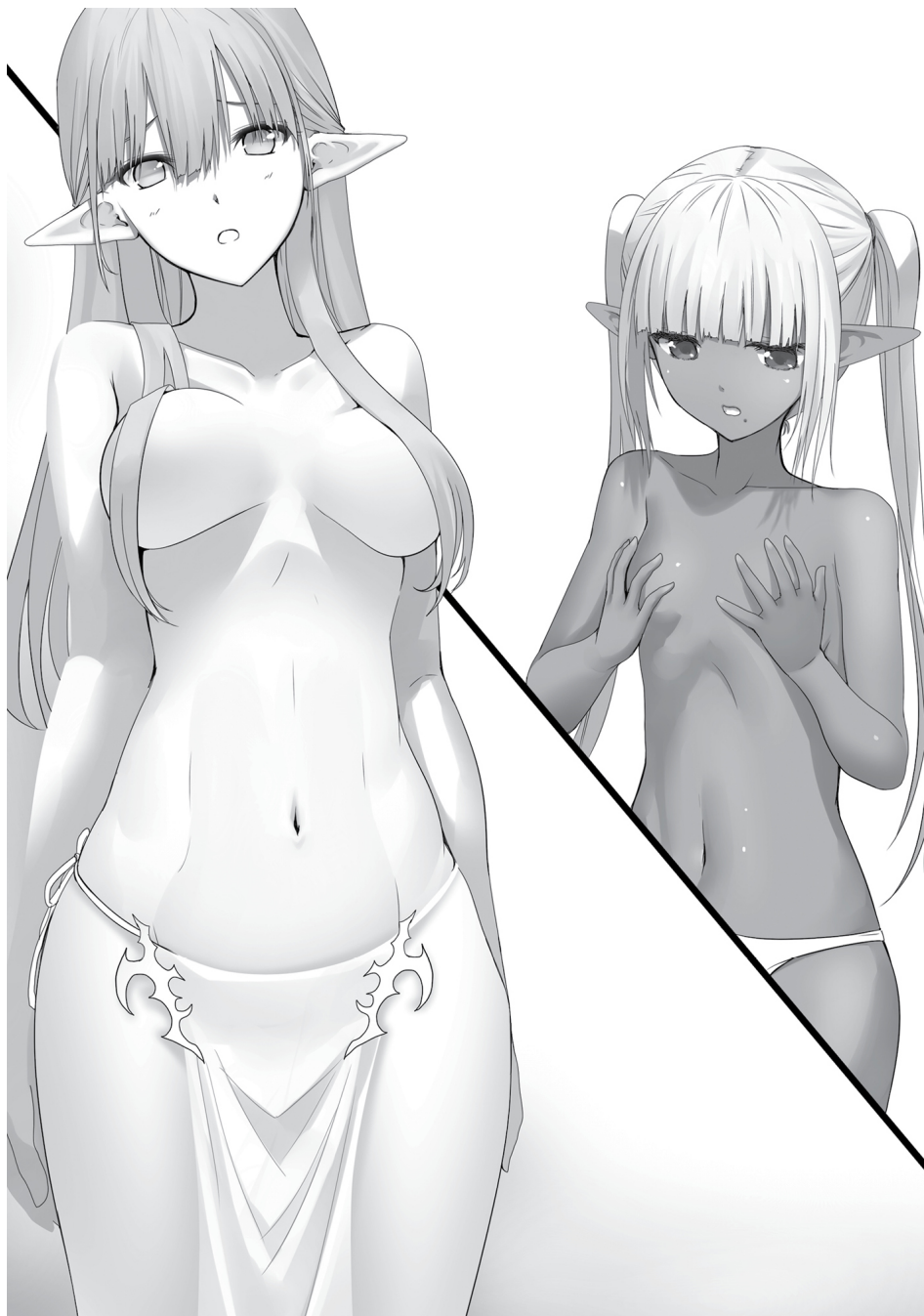
Seras smiled bitterly to herself. It was almost ironic.

"I-I..."

Lis placed her small hands on her own chest.

"Will mine grow to be like yours someday, Miss Seras?" she said timidly.

Seras wasn't able to answer immediately and made up for it by forcing herself to smile at Lis. Lis's chest was small, but perfectly normal for her age.



How should I respond, though? I can hardly lie to her and pretend everybody's the same. Sir Too-ka would surely give her a straight answer...

"The tavern owner..."

Seras turned to look at Lis again, concerned.

"The woman you worked for?"

"Y-yes. She said if my chest doesn't grow properly, nobody will treat me like a real woman when I grow up. So I—" Lis looked overcome with emotion and anxiety.

"That's not true at all," responded Seras. She was angry—disgusted, even. How could anyone teach such ridiculous nonsense to a young girl? "Forget all of that."

"Huh?"

Seras tried to sound both firm and kind when she spoke.

"Everything that woman told you is wrong. Please forget everything she ever said."

"Forget...everything...?"

"Yes. Listen to those that you trust from now on, and no one else. Only accept the things that you know in your heart to be true."

"I-I will, Miss Seras," Lis said, looking down sheepishly at her feet. "Thank you." Her anxious expression transformed into something lighter. "Th-then I'll...listen to the things you say from now on."

Seras laughed gently and smiled, feeling warm inside.

"Very well. I'll try to make sure we have many chances to speak with each other." Seras held out one of her tunics. "You can wear this until your clothes dry, if you'd like. It's too large, but..."

Lis pulled on the tunic, which was baggy, as expected.

"Miss Seras... The chest area is..."

The cloth around Lis's chest was twisted and bunched up. Seras cleared her throat, her cheeks hot.

"I'm sorry about that. Bear with it while your own clothes dry."

"O-okay..."

Things felt a little awkward after that, but they chatted about their favorite foods and all kinds of other things while they waited for

their clothing to dry by the fire, and the awkwardness soon faded. After changing back into her own clothes, Lis smiled happily at Seras—the first genuine smile she’d seen from the girl.

“It’s like I’ve got another big sister now!” she said.

MIMORI TOUKA

AFTER SERAS AND LIS left to get changed, Eve came and sat down in front of me with a thud.

“Let’s try to get some weapons and armor together, then,” she said.

“...”

“Hm? Something wrong, Too-ka?”

“Maybe it’s because of all the fur that I didn’t notice, but you’re pretty lightly dressed, huh? Not much armor either.”

If she were a human, Eve would’ve been considered quite the exhibitionist, but maybe things were different for leopardmen.

“What’s important is how easily I can move around. The strength of a leopardman is in our speed and quick reactions—I should make the most of what I’ve got. No point in weighing myself down.”

“I noticed how quick you were, yeah. You really use it well in combat.”

We were quiet for a few seconds.

“...You haven’t asked about my past with Lis.”

“I figured you’ll tell me if you wanted to. Lots of people don’t want to talk about their pasts.”

Seras, for one. Before she became a holy knight, she was from a highborn family in some high elf country. I didn’t know why she’d chosen to come to the human-controlled Holy Empire of Neah, or if something happened to her home country, or how she spent her days in Neah.

There were plenty of mysteries about Seras’s past, but I had no plans to ask her about them directly. I didn’t need to know everything

about Seras, Eve, or Lis—and there were things in my own past I didn't want to talk about either.

"If you want to talk, feel free to talk. I don't know much about Seras's past, but that doesn't bother me."

"Understood. I won't ask about you or Seras either, then. A healthy distance between us is probably best anyway."

Eve and Lis are traveling to the Forbidden Witch, that's all we need to know for now. They aren't coming along for my revenge.

Eve went to check on the horses, and I began to cut up ingredients for the pot. Cooking in the pot was simple—just throw everything in, season it a little, and you almost always got something that was good enough to eat. And if the pot wasn't enough, I could always use my magic leather pouch.

"A-allow me to help." Lis had gotten dressed and appeared next to me.

"Aren't you tired? You can take a rest if you need to."

"D-do you mind if I help?"

...C'mon, don't look at me like that.

"All right, then, will you peel these for me?"

"Yes!" Lis happily sat down and started peeling vegetables.

"Hey, you're really good at that."

"Th-thank you for the compliment," Lis said, bunching her shoulders nervously.

"Are you good at cooking too?" I asked.

"Yes, I always helped out in the kitchens. The people who came to our tavern were always happy to eat my food, but the owner took all the credit."

Another terrible story about that woman. I closed my eyes for a moment, angry at what I'd just heard.

"Mr. Too-ka?"

"Yeah?"

"I... I'd be really happy if you'd allow me to cook for you. I can help carry the bags too..." Lis had stopped peeling, and her shoulders and voice were trembling.

Still not used to asking for things, is she?

“You don’t need to find work for yourself, okay? Eve is doing more than enough for your share, and we’ve got things covered.”

“N-no, th-that’s not it! I didn’t feel anything when I worked at that tavern, b-but...but if it’s for you and Miss Seras, I want to be of help. That’s truly how I feel.”

“All right. I’ll consider it.”

Lis smiled. “Th-thank you, Mr. Too-ka...”

After they ate, Lis and Eve fell asleep together at once. It was like a great weight had been lifted from both of them—the pressure was gone.

“They’re out like lights,” whispered Seras.

We extinguished the flames and sat on the other side of the cave to give them some peace.

“Aren’t you tired too, Sir Too-ka? I’ll keep watch—you can go to sleep if you’d like.”

“Actually, I’m wide awake. Couldn’t sleep even if I wanted to.”

Seras knelt on the ground and patted her lap.

“How about it? You might be able to get some sleep if you lie down.”

“You’re tired too, aren’t you? If anything—” I sat cross-legged and tapped my legs as Seras had done. “How about it?” I asked.

“Y-you’re sure? If you don’t mind...”

Seras got on all fours and crawled over to me.

...I was just kidding, to be honest.

Seras laid her head in my lap, and when I looked down, she was gazing right up at me. Her eyes were sky blue, staring at me intently, and after a moment she seemed to notice something.

“Ah. Don’t tell me... You weren’t being serious, were you?” she said quietly.

I shook my head. Her pale cheeks flushed deep red. Seras closed her eyes, fighting her embarrassment.

“I’ve done something terribly rude again, haven’t I?” she said.

“No, it’s fine!” I said quickly. “I don’t mind this kind of stuff once in a while.”

“Th-thank you for being so considerate...” Even her ears were red now.

“There’s something I’ve wanted to ask you for a while...do you mind if I touch your ears?”

Seras nervously caressed her ears with her long fingers before answering.

“G-go ahead... If that’s what you want.”

“I’ve always wanted to touch an elf’s ears, just once.” My hands were shaking.

... *Why am I so nervous about doing this?*

“Nhh... H-how do they feel?”

“Kinda strange, I guess.”



These weren't some prosthetics for a TV show, they were her real ears. Like regular ears, but softer, somehow, almost velvety. I stroked them lightly with my fingertips, and Seras twisted in my lap.

"Oh, Sir Too-ka—wait a m-minute..."

I guess they're sensitive.

After Seras got up from her rest, we discussed our plans going forward.

"Eve is a powerful fighter. I think we can count on her abilities in the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters," she said.

"Just like you, yeah? I can think of all kinds of ways she can be useful to us, and not just in battle. I'm glad to have her coming along."

"This might be an impolite thing to ask, but..."

Seras looked over at where Lis and Eve were sleeping.

"Is there something special to you about Eve and Lis?"

"Hm? What makes you ask?"

"You seem so kind and warm with them—almost the same as you are with me."

Seras really doesn't have an eye for some stuff... She's like my foster mother in that way too.

"You mean...normally I'm a cold person?"

"Th-that's not what I meant!" she said, laying a hand on her chest. "I would never imply—"

"I'm kidding! It's okay. Relax."

"S-sir Too-ka..."

Her shoulders dropped in relief and embarrassment. I looked over at Eve.

"I'm that way with her for the same reason I am with you."

"Because she reminds you of your foster mother?"

"My foster dad in her case, I guess."

"Your foster father. I see."

"Yeah. I mean, obviously there are differences, but there's

something good in both of them that feels the same.”

My foster father was a good man—that’s why he took me in to begin with. His estranged older brother forced me on him, and my foster father blamed him—but that blame never extended to me. My foster father’s straightforward honesty and my foster mother’s reason and kindness were the only reasons I was standing here today.

Seras smiled at me.

“Your foster parents must be very important to you, then. The expression on your face when you talk of them...it’s different, somehow.”

Is my expression really that different? I don’t know what she means.

“My life would’ve been so much worse if it wasn’t for them.”

I can’t thank them enough... They’re the only reason I want to return to my old world, to express my thanks properly, in person. Thank you for taking me in. Thank you for raising me.

“And Lis is... Well, she’s kinda like me.”

Seras Ashrain reminds me of my foster mother. Eve Speed reminds me of my foster father. Lisbeth reminds me of myself. It’s a strange coincidence.

“Lisbeth... She reminds you of yourself?”

“The place she was left.”

That tavern owner was just like my real parents. I was abused and belittled from a young age—Lis and I have that in common. The only difference is that Lis was able to bear it. I tried to endure for as long as I could, but the seeds of murder took root within me. I wanted to kill the people who abused me before they got me first. Lis is still a kind girl through and through—there’s nothing of the woman who abused her in there. Lis always blamed herself, I guess, thinking she was too weak, or not good enough. We have similar backgrounds, but that’s the real difference between us—I’m a terrible person. I remove anyone who gets in my way, annihilating them when it suits me. Too-ka Mimori is never going to save the world, he’s just going to fulfill his own selfish goals. He will have his revenge. That’s why I—

I interrupted my own thoughts. “I know I’m repeating myself, but you can leave whenever you want. All I care about is my revenge—that’s all.”

“You know I have my own feelings about the Goddess of Alion. I have no intention of leaving you,” Seras said, smiling playfully. “Besides, I was only just promoted to vice-captain.”

“I’m counting on you, then.”

“Leave it to me, Master.”

“Hmm... You’re coming along to help me, right? Why don’t I do a favor for you in return? As long as it’s something I can actually do, I’ll do it.”

“Hm?”

“It’s selfish of me to bring you along like this. You don’t have to decide right now or anything. Just give it some thought.”

“Understood.”

“Get some sleep, okay? I’ll stay up until Eve’s shift.”

Seras laid down to rest, and I sat next to her.

“All right, Sir Too-ka, I’m ready.” But before I could cast Sleep, she continued. “...I’m really going to give that favor some thought, you know.”

“Nh?”

“Anything I want? I’ll think it through.”

“Sure. I wasn’t kidding about that.”

Seras hid her face under the blanket.

“You ready?”

“I am,” she whispered. “Good night, Sir Too-ka.”

“Night,” I replied, holding out my hand.

“Sleep.”

THE KING OF OLZA

THE MONSTER SLAYER King Jin held his head in his hands.

Ashint have disappeared?! How can this be?!

After her escape, Eve Speed had been pursued by Baron Zuan and

his men, with Ashint leading the charge—that much was common knowledge. But only the corpses of the baron, his men, and some mercenaries were found... Nobody could tell Jin where Ashint was now.

That cursed Zuan... Did he fight with them? I told him so many times to be careful, and to watch his tongue in his dealings with them!

Something had gone wrong. All that had been found of Ashint were some scattered weapons and armor. Maybe they'd been discarded in the hope of a quicker escape—even without their weapons, Ashint could rely on their curses. There were signs that the baron's men had been looted, as well...

Jin thought for a moment.

There was no way Eve Speed could have defeated that many men alone. Had Ashint sided with her for some reason? Jin couldn't imagine why they would do such a thing.

An internal dispute, then, was the most likely culprit.

I was wrong about him...

Baron Zuan had always had a skill for seeing through the roughest, most amoral person's exterior and right through to their potential underneath. He gave them far more freedom and better payment than most nobility would have, and they adored him for it. Jin had made use of that ability to win over the dregs of the world many times, sending Zuan the most unsavory characters and tasks—chief among them managing the Bloodsport Colosseum and finding new fighters. The baron was used to handling difficult people through his work there, though of course Jin had heard the rumors about him...

But were these Ashint people too much, even for him? Jin didn't think he was wrong to have trusted Baron Zuan, and yet...

The current situation was unthinkable.

I wanted to use them. They claimed they had defeated the Elite Five! We could've used them to show our power to our neighbors...

Jin had brought the Dragonslayer under his control, and he'd hoped to do the same to Ashint with enough time and patience.

But now...how will I explain this to the Goddess?

After the roundtable at the White Citadel of Protection, Jin had approached the Goddess Vicius with an idea.

“Please, will you grant me leave to handle this Ashint situation? Heh heh heh... I know not if they are truly the Black Dragon Slayers they claim to be, but I swear I shall find the truth!”

The Goddess agreed because she trusted him. She even removed her disciple, who was usually assigned to keep an eye on things, from his country as a symbol of that trust.

Nyantán... Just when we had finally gotten rid of that pesky girl...

All she had going for her was a beautiful face and figure. Other than that, she was nothing but trouble. Her hard, judgmental eyes seemed to see right through everything he did. She was cold and standoffish, even to him, the king of the country in which she lived. Jin hated the very sight of her but could do nothing about it—even among Vicius’s disciples, Nyantán was special. He could scarcely imagine what revenge the Goddess would take on his country if he criticized her, let alone tried to get rid of her.

Ngh... That impudent girl will be sent back here, won’t she?!

He crumpled the report in his hand.

I can’t rest with her watching me as she does... I need to find Ashint and renegotiate somehow. They managed to kill the baron himself, and even the head of his personal guard...not to mention countless mercenaries and other fighters. I’d intended to take my time proving the rumors that Ashint were the ones who defeated the Elite Five, but...

Jin no longer had any doubt—Ashint clearly had the strength to do such a thing. He was unsure whether even his Monster Slayer Knights could rein them in now.

Recalling the Dragonslayer from the Goddess might prove difficult now, as well...

“Pardon me, my king... What would you have me do?”

Jin flinched at the sudden interruption. He had almost forgotten the assistant standing nearby. Jin quickly recovered his composure and covered his eyes with his hands, feigning tears.

“Oh... Baron Zuan’s death has affected me more than I care to admit... I’m fine, of course. My apologies.”

“This whole business with Ashint...” said the assistant, “how should we report it to Alion?”

Jin began to sweat.

“I suppose we have no choice but to report it in full. The consequences would be dire if the Goddess learned later that we didn’t let her know immediately.”

The Goddess was a truly terrifying being—one could not afford to be deceived by her beauty, nor to underestimate her wrath if they should displease her.

Jin remembered the rumors about the Holy Empire of Neah when they were invaded by the Bakoss Empire. Incursions into the territory of other nations were unthinkable—forbidden by the Goddess herself. But when Bakoss invaded Neah, she didn’t lift a finger to intervene.

No one knew what Neah had done to deserve such treatment, why they had lost the Goddess’s protection. One theory was that the Holy Emperor had done something to offend the Goddess Vicius—her word was absolute, after all.

That rebellious child, the Wildly Beautiful Emperor, is no doubt on the same path. We are all in the Goddess’s hands. Is she simply trying to keep us scared?

Jin sat up straighter in his chair, feeling strangely lightheaded.

“Find them. Find Ashint, no matter what it takes...”

“My king, what of the leopardman? A young dark elf has also disappeared in what’s believed to be a related incident. The owner of the White Leg Tavern where she lived was murdered,” said the assistant.

Suddenly, Jin was filled with fury.

“A coward who turned and ran and some powerless little girl?! They’ll be dead by the roadside in no time! Ashint are the key. Ashint! Muster all our forces to search for them! Do you hear me?!”

“Y-yes, my liege!”

Jin ground his teeth as the assistant fled the room.

Ngh... My plans to prove my loyalty to the Goddess, to have Ashint on my side... T-to think they would all come to nothing!

The Monster Slayer King seethed with bitter, growing resentment.

NYANTAN KIKIPAT

“**M**_{Y, MY...} So that band of curse mages has killed the baron and completely disappeared. How brutish of them! Oh, how *terrifying~!*” said the Goddess lightly, the report she’d received from Ulza in hand.

The purported slayers of the Elite Five had clearly covered their tracks.

“But is this cursed magic genuine, I wonder? I simply cannot believe it. Am I just ignorant of its existence? Do you know anything about it?”

Nyantan Kikipat stood against the wall of the Goddess’s private quarters. She shook her head. “No.”

“I see,” said the Goddess flatly. She returned her gaze to the report. “Terrifying indeed. Hmm, but if Ashint were to somehow join up with the Wildly Beautiful Emperor, then...hmm. I’d prefer not to send you back to Ulza at all. I have a vitally important role in mind for you, Nyantan.”

She tossed aside the report in her hands and took a deep breath.

“We’ve had such troubles of late, have we not? The Monster Slayer Knights appear committed to locating Ashint. And while I can hardly afford to ignore a power rivalling the Elite Five’s...” She puffed out her cheeks but kept a smile plastered across her face. “Oh it is *such* a bother.”

“Is there a problem?” said a man’s voice lightly.

Agit Angun was one of the Four Holy Elders, a group of siblings of heroic blood—descendants of the heroes from another world. They had been summoned from their home country of Yonato by the Goddess. It was said that they surpassed even the Holy Priest of Yonato herself in power.

Nyantan had nearly forgotten they were in the room at all until Agit had spoken. One of the young man’s eyes was covered by his long black hair, and despite his gentle expression, he appeared aloof and disinterested...but his abilities could not be denied.

He continued to speak. “Shouldn’t you be mostly concerned about the Demon King essence that can weaken your divine powers, Vicius?”

“Hmm, I suppose.”

“You could fight the Elite Five, Ashint—whoever you’d like, as long as the essence wasn’t involved, right?”

Agit was right—neither Ashint nor the Elite Five would ever be capable of defeating the Goddess. He smiled politely before continuing.

“Shouldn’t your focus be on the ever-moving armies of the Demon King in the north?” he asked.

“It is as you say,” said the Goddess dismissively, “but with disturbances of such magnitude at my back, I find it *ever* so hard to concentrate on the fight in front of me.”

“Ha ha ha, never took you for a worrier.”

“Mm? Is there something wrong with worrying? I’m sure you meant no offense, but your tone is terribly rude.”

For a few moments, a heavy, suffocating silence fell across the room.

“Uh, sorry?” Agit caved first, apologizing to her with a grin. The Goddess smiled back at him.

“Not at all~! There I go again, letting my tongue slip, and... Oh, how embarrassing! ㄟㄟ”

Nyantán watched the exchange in silence. She could see that the Goddess was irritated by the situation—the disappearance of Ashint upset her more than she cared to admit.

And there’s more trouble ahead... She wouldn’t be bothered by Agit if she weren’t already angry.

There was a knock at the door.

“Goddess, Sir Banewolf is here to see you.”

“Oh, here at last? Quite late, I must say!”

The Goddess rose from her chair, and a huge, burly man entered, ducking under the door frame. He scratched his head.

“Ah... Sorry I’m late.”

“Not at all, we’re so glad you could join us,” she said, spreading her arms out gracefully. “Welcome, Dragonslayer.”

SOGOU AYAKA

“**T**HANK YOU very much,” said Ayaka, bowing neatly to Nyantan Kikipat. She was a member of the Goddess’s special team of disciples, here as her representative.

“You’re talented. Not quite experienced enough in battle yet, but your technique surely surpasses my own,” said Nyantan.

Ayaka had been searching for a way to grow stronger and approached Nyantan for training.

“Please, train me. Even just a little would help.”

She was surprised when her request was accepted...on the condition that she speak of it to no one. Nyantan’s explanation of the secrecy had been surprising, something Ayaka wouldn’t have even considered.

“It would be difficult to get the Goddess’s permission to train you, I imagine,” she had said.

Well, the Goddess doesn’t like me, and Nyantan is one of her subordinates. I guess that makes sense.

They’d started training together, using an old prison cell in the bowels of the castle to avoid being seen. They’d only had a few chances to meet thus far—Nyantan was busy and didn’t have much time to spare. Even those few meetings, however, had been incredibly valuable to Ayaka.

“I’m fairly certain my stat modifiers are the only reason I’m able to keep up with you,” she said.

“Perhaps,” replied Nyantan, “but there’s something special about you. You’re talented. Did you never discuss that with the martial arts instructor you spoke of?”

“I...did.” Ayaka’s grandmother had always praised her abilities.

“You will become strong, Ayaka Sogou,” said Nyantan.

“Nyantan-san,” said Ayaka, working up the courage to ask the question she hadn’t been able to stop thinking about. “Why did you

agree to teach me?”

Nyantán's eyes were kind as she gazed at Ayaka.

“You remind me of my little sister, and—”

She stopped abruptly.

Did she just...? That seemed like a slip of the tongue.

Ayaka felt like she'd done something wrong or heard something she shouldn't have. Panicking, she tried to change the subject.

“S-so Nyantán-san, are you married?”

“Betrothed, you mean? I am not, nor have I ever been.”

“Really?”

“I have never had a loving relationship with a member of the opposite sex, nor had intercourse.”

“I-inter...c-course. I see.”

Ayaka reflexively looked away. She could feel herself blushing. When Ayaka glanced back up at the purple-haired swordswoman, though, Nyantán didn't look fazed at all.

“B-but that's quite a surprise. You're so beautiful, Nyantán-san...”

“Beauty is inferior.”

“Huh? Inferior to what?”

“Beauty and strength are both inferior to wisdom. At present, I am most fervently seeking the latter.” Nyantán stared at her intently, eyes deadly serious. “This world isn't kind enough to allow beauty alone to lead to happiness.” She turned and moved towards the staircase behind her. “It's eat or be eaten. Show them a chink in your armor, and you'll be entrapped or attacked before you even know what happened. Remember that.”

Nyantán's last two words rattled around in Ayaka's head long after she left the old prison cell.

Remember that...

In that moment, Nyantán sounded like she was speaking to a younger sister.

Ayaka headed up to change.

There was an announcement from the Goddess in the middle of today's

session, a summons to all the heroes. I wonder what she wants.

To call the room Ayaka found herself in a *changing room* would understate its ostentatiousness. It looked like a princess's dressing room. Only a few of the students were permitted to use it—Ayaka herself, the Takao Sisters, and Ikusaba Asagi.

Aside from her three classmates, she'd had never seen anyone but Nyantan Kikipat use the room, but today Ayaka found two women she'd never seen before.

"We're all getting changed together today, huh?" said one of them.

"I apologize, we were unable to prepare separate rooms in time," said Nyantan.

"Hey, no, no, we're not complaining! Look, I mean, we ain't never gonna get another chance to use a flashy room like this one."

The two women belonged to a mercenary band—the Sabre-toothed Tigers, they had said.

"We were in Mils recently, y'know—baron there was recruiting mercenaries."

Nyantan stopped what she was doing to look over at them again.

"The Black Dragon Knights fell near there," she noted.

"Yeah, yeah. So the ruins clearing we were at, it was a total bust. Completely screwed us. We're tryna have fun adventures here—wind in your hair, freedom, the open road, yeah? Ain't no point in freedom with no freakin' coin."

"Someone took your loot, you mean?" asked Nyantan.

"Nah, there was something weird about the ruins. Dead monsters down there without a mark on 'em. Got such a bad feeling about the place we had to turn back."

"She's real smart when it comes to this stuff," the other woman chimed in. "Observant. Our leader's always right!"

The two were silent for a while. Nyantan pulled on her shirt.

"No marks... I was assigned to Ulza but heard nothing of this. What was the cause?"

The Sabre-toothed Tiger's leader looked down, her shoulders

sinking.

“Asked some of the others, but thing is, nobody really knows. Some kind of gas comin’ up from the lower levels, maybe?”

“Hey, you think maybe there’s some connection to the Black Dragon Knights thing?” said the other woman. Her leader quickly laughed off the suggestion.

“Nah. How could there be?”

“Did you hear word of Ashint while in Mils?” Nyantan asked.

“Ah, the ones who killed ’em, right? Not much.”

“I see.”

Rumors about the fall of the Black Dragon Knights, once the strongest forces of the Bakoss Empire, were already spreading like wildfire through the castle—and so were rumors about Ashint, the group of curse mages who had supposedly defeated them.

“Well, see you around.”

Nyantan finished changing and left first, followed closely by the two women.

“Looks like we’re in for something today,” said Ikusaba Asagi, who was changing across the room.

Is she talking to me?

The Takao Sisters were also there, over in a corner.

Ayaka debated whether or not to respond.

“Y-yeah,” she finally said, nodding.

“Our little Goddess is calling in all kinds of people, it seems. She’s really planning on pushing us, eh?” said Asagi.

“...We’re heroes. This is just what we have to do.”

“Oh wow, Ayaka you’re so serious~! Call me a hero all you like, but it doesn’t make me feel any more heroic, y’know?”

“It’s the only way we can return home.”

“Hmm... Serious as serious can be... So, like, what’s your type?”

“Wh-where did that come from?” said Ayaka, taken aback.

“Y’know, I’ve never even seen you with a guy.”

“Wh-why would you assume...?”

“You’re popular though, right? Ah, I get it~! You’re too good for them?”

“...I-It’s rather upsetting if that’s how you think of me.”

“Huge boobs too. I mean, *c’mon*.”

Ayaka blushed and scrunched her eyebrows in annoyance. “They are not!”

“Y’think? I mean Pidgey’s in the hall of fame, sure, but the Takao Sisters can’t even compete with you!”

“You can’t judge people by their chest size!”

“But like, *c’mon*. Even *I* was surprised the first time I saw your black underwear. Meow~!”

Ayaka quickly attempted to cover her bra and panties with her hands. “What does the color of my underwear have to do with anything?!”

“Not just that. It’s the design too. I mean, showing off a little, aren’t they?”

“I-I got these from my grandmother! St-stop looking at me like that!”

“Whoa~! Touchy subject, huh? Like, sorry.” Asagi was overdramatic as ever, holding her hands up in surrender. “I get it now, though. Your reactions are exactly what make you so popular, Aya-pyon. The boys love that pure, naïve vibe you’re giving off. It only they knew what was underneath! Ha ha... Maybe it’s the ivory tower upbringing. You really are weird, y’know. Not like anyone else in our class.”

“...I’m really that different from the others?”

“A high-school girl who doesn’t use a single social media platform? You’re a rare breed! You’ve only got family added on R@IN, right? Can’t find any secret accounts for you, either.”

“Secret accounts? What do you mean?”

“Ha, you don’t even know! Heh heh.”

The Takao sisters silently slipped out of the changing room.

“No sign of *them* on social media, either.”

“You think it really makes that much of a difference?” asked Ayaka.

“It’s like a whole different world, yeah,” replied Asagi. “On there, we’d get to see the real you, without all this makeup...”

“What? You mean...everybody posts pictures of themselves without makeup?”

When I looked at it, it seemed like everyone was trying look perfect.

“Eh? Hah hah, Ayaka-senpai you’re too much! ♪♪ Are you trying to be funny? It’s a freakin’ metaphor!”

“...?”

“No, I get it. Boys like that about you too, that airhead vibe... Like, LOL~!” Asagi said as she left the room.

“...”

Ayaka finished changing alone, still wondering what Asagi meant.

The heroes assembled in the castle’s large, walled garden, where no one was allowed without the Goddess’s permission. It was filled with flowers in full bloom, the air heavy with their sweet scent. It would’ve been the perfect place to relax, but today, the heroes were anxious. The Goddess only summoned all of them when there was something important to discuss.

They had been clearing ruins for a long time now, earning EXP by fighting the golden-eyed monsters that dwelled within. Alion’s people had also done their best to capture golden-eyed monsters, which were then given to the heroes for experience points. It was plain to see by how many monsters each group received what the Goddess thought of them—the majority were given to Kirihara’s group, and very few were allotted to Ayaka’s.

But we’ve leveled up considerably by defeating monsters in the ruins...

Ayaka knew how to fight them now.

“Everyone’s like *super* on edge in the castle lately, right? Whatcha think, Pidgey?”

“Eh? D-do you think so?”

“Man, you’re so slow~! It’s like your body feeds your tits before

your brain!”

“A-Asagi-san...” Kashima Kobato covered her chest, her face bright red.

I should say something to Asagi, Akaya thought indignantly. She's always made cruel comments like that, even in our old world. I should warn her against doing it again.

Ayaka opened her mouth to speak, but Kobato noticed and shook her head quietly.

I'm fine, her eyes seemed to say. Arguing will only make it worse.

Did she sense what I was about to say?

Ayaka saw the strength behind those eyes. Reluctantly, she kept quiet. Kobato quietly nodded her thanks.

Ikusaba Asagi was growing more and more influential within class 2-C, likely because of her unique skill. As a B-class hero, it was rare that she had acquired one to begin with—the Goddess had been overjoyed.

“I always knew there was something special about you, Asagi-san. You're a natural leader,” she had said.

Asagi's unique skill was Queen Bee, a skill that enhanced others. It let her heavily buff the stats of multiple targets, increasing them beyond their normal range for short periods of time. Asagi's group had strength in numbers—it was fortunate, then, that her skill let them use those numbers to gain an even greater advantage in combat. Despite their focus on teamwork, Kirihara's group never tried to recruit Asagi.

They don't think much of her, do they? Maybe they think it would be dangerous to have her too close. Kirihara clearly doesn't trust her.

Kirihara had apparently refused to allow her in his group more than once, and the Goddess had given up trying. Ayaka, on the other hand, would be welcomed with open arms—she just had no intention of working with them.

Yasu Tomohiro's group was also growing stronger, but for the most part it was still a one-man show, with Yasu himself as the star. As the sole A-class hero, he was the only one getting any stronger, with the weaker heroes hanging on his coattails, picking up the crumbs of EXP he left behind. Ayaka's group, on the other hand, tried their best to split everything equally.

Suou Kayako had suggested that Akaya should receive most of their group's experience points, but Ayaka refused outright. There was only so much one person could do on their own—they all had to work together.

As a result, everyone in Ayaka's group had leveled up and learned some common skills. Common skills were in theory attainable by any hero, and were split into five categories: attack skills, defense skills, healing skills, enhancement skills, and status effect skills.

As the heroes leveled up, their skill trees grew and changed color as they unlocked higher-level abilities. Just as the Goddess had said, the status effect skills appeared to be useless, and anyone who ended up unlocking them, no matter how good they sounded, was essentially out of luck. Unique skills and the other common skills were much better. Unique skills had their own skill levels associated with them, and the skill would increase and gain power as it was used.

"I wasn't sure how this was going to work at first, but with these defense and enhancement skills, I might actually be able to support you. It's just like you said, Ayaka-chan!" Minamino Moe had said when they'd first unlocked common skills. She'd sounded relieved.

With support skills, there was no need for most of the group to be out fighting on the front lines. Ayaka handled the close combat, and the rest of her group usually supported her from behind with their abilities, dealing finishing blows to the monsters once they were incapacitated. Everybody had their part to play.

Ayaka opened her stat screen.

Ayaka Sogou

Level 115

HP: +1390 MP: +2878

Attack: +10983 Defense: +2256 Vitality: +2313

Speed: +1574 < +500 > Intelligence: +1450

Title: S-Class Hero

Her level was a lot higher now. The Goddess had encouraged them to level quickly, and it was clearly working. Ayaka heard that

Kirihara Takuto had already hit level 200. After level 100, though, leveling up slowed down considerably for everyone. Ayaka's stats were also increasing at a noticeably slower rate—only her attack stat was still rising quickly.

Didn't one of the boys in Yasu's group say something about this?

"Once you hit a certain point, leveling gets way slower, just like an MMO!"

Ayaka didn't know what an MMO was, and she certainly wasn't about to ask anyone. She wondered if the slower stat increase was because they were nearing a cap of some sort.

Ayaka was worried about something else. She checked her skill screen, staring at the display with a hand pressed against her mouth. Of all the S-class heroes, she alone still hadn't unlocked her unique skill. Ayaka looked over at the two Takao sisters, standing a few steps away from everyone else. They already had their skills, as did all the A-class heroes—even Asagi, a B-class hero, had one.

"Worried about your skills?" asked Suou Kayako, sensing something was bothering her. Ayaka forced a smile.

"Y-yes...a little..."

I'm the only front-line fighter our group has... I have to try harder.

"But you've unlocked skills in the specialist section, right?"

"Yes, that's true."

Ayaka's skill tree was unique—she had no common skills, but in their place were specialist combat skills that she could obtain. These skills played a large part in supporting her during battle.

But these specialist combat skills are hardly comparable to all the other heroes' unique skills...

Ayaka was pressed for time. The shadow of death always hung over her in combat—she couldn't just wait for her skills to develop on their own.

"Sorry to keep you all waiting!"

The Goddess arrived at last.

"Bout time!" complained Oyamada Shougo.

"I do apologize, Oyamada-san."

“If you weren’t so freakin’ beautiful I’d be swearin’ up a storm right now, Goddess-senpai!”

“My, my, the perks of being beautiful~!”

“But hey, there’s only so much it’ll let you get away with.”

Some of the girls in Asagi’s group started whispering to each other.

“He’s the worst.”

“So loud... Shut up already.”

“He only cares about looking cool. I’m so done with that guy.”

Ayaka wondered if they really felt that way, or if they were trying to sway Asagi and keep her from leaving their group for Kiriwara’s.

Suddenly, the whispers changed. “W-who’s that?! He’s so freakin’ handsome!”

The girls had caught sight of the two men and two women who came in behind the Goddess. They were all dressed the same but didn’t seem to be her subordinates. Behind them, a huge, bearded man appeared in the doorway. He looked wild but strong and ruggedly handsome, like an actor out of a fantasy film.

He seemed completely nonchalant as the sound of his longsword’s scabbard scraping across the floor filled the room. Eight other armed individuals, clearly weaker than the first few, filed in after him—Ayaka remembered two of them from the changing room earlier. As they lined up around the Goddess, Nyantan entered the room at the end of the line and closed the door behind her.

“Everyone has been leveling up so wonderfully fast,” said the Goddess. “It truly is a joy to behold. First, let me thank you all for your hard work...”

The Goddess bowed, elegant and smooth, quickly raising her head when it was done.

“But understand this—no matter how high your levels rise, they are but numbers. A measure of your fundamental abilities, no? What you all currently lack is technique—the art of battle, one might say. Ah, what am I thinking!”

The Goddess corrected herself.

“Sogou-san has those ancient martial arts she’s so good at, doesn’t

she? I still remember her losing her senses and trying to strike me. Oh no, I haven't forgotten *that* at all. Every action has consequences, you see. You never know when something you do might come back to bite you. Be careful, won't you, heroes? ♪♪

"Get to the freakin' point!" called Oyamada.

The Goddess feigned distress.

"I'm so terribly sorry, I only meant to impart some wisdom...but Oyamada-san, this is exactly what I'm speaking of. Your harmful and inconsiderate remarks...you may come to regret them one day. Oh, how *cruel*..."

"Sh-shut up already! You called us out here 'cause you wanted to talk, yeah? Quit killing the mood and tell us what you want!"

"Shougo."

It was Kirihara.

"Huh? What, Takuto?"

"Lashing out at everyone like this—it's not a good look. It's about time you grew up."

"But Takutooooo!"

"If things go the same way they did with Nyantan, I'm not jumping in to save you..."

"Ouch. Sorry, Goddess-senpai, jeez! You'll, like, forgive me, right?!"

His apology was hollow and insincere, but the Goddess accepted it and moved on as if nothing had happened.

"Chipper as always this morning, Oyamada-san! ♪♪ Impatient too, I see! Then for your sake, let's get going, shall we? ♪"

She explained that the people assembled behind her were here to train them, brought in from all corners of the continent.

The whispering started again.

"They're called the Four Holy Elders! D-didn't the Goddess just say they're, like, all siblings? Right?! Right?!"

"So like, those girls with Agit-san aren't dating him or anything?!"

"Kyaah!"

“So whatcha think?! Better than Kirihara-kun?!”

“They’re like totally different types!”

“You’re so right.”

Several of the girls were getting worked up, whispering increasingly loudly.

The Goddess continued her explanation undeterred, seeming to tolerate them for now. Ayaka was worked up too, albeit for different reasons.

Those Four Holy Elders...all of them were incredibly strong. That huge man too, the one she introduced as Banewolf.

Ayaka felt like she was face to face with a bottomless well of strength, though the man was just standing in front of her. She swallowed.

I have a long way to go...

“—and so these individuals will be your instructors,” said the Goddess, “The Sabre-toothed Tigers will work with Asagi-san’s group, the Dragonslayer will go to Yasu-san’s group, Nyantan will instruct the Takao sisters, and the Four Holy Elders will be with Kirihara-san’s group. I leave them in your capable hands~!”

Wait, what about us? There isn’t even anybody left to teach us—will the Goddess be instructing us personally?

But the Goddess looked as if she had finished her task for the day. Akaya was about to raise her hand to ask a question when someone else spoke up.

“Sogou Ayaka-san’s group hasn’t been assigned an instructor.”

“Hmm~?” The Goddess tilted her head to the side.

Takao Hijiri’s hand was already in the air as she spoke, her expression clear and cool. She looked beautiful, standing up straight and resolute—fearless. The Goddess smiled uncomfortably at the question.

“Oh my! Right, right. My apologies for not remembering sooner. I completely forgot to explain! I intended for the Black Dragon Knights’ Elite Five to be in charge of Kirihara-san’s group, but as you’ve no doubt already heard, tragically, they died recently. As a result, we simply don’t have enough instructors to go around. It has been *quite* the

bother, as you can imagine!”

She pressed her hands to her cheeks.

“But, well, Sogou-san has her ancient martial arts, and is even confident enough in her abilities to attempt to defy the heavens! I believe it will be sufficient for her to instruct her own group in those techniques. That was my hope at least. Is there some sort of problem with my suggestion?”

“Of course there’s a problem,” responded Hijiri bluntly.

“Oh? Whatever makes you say that? Might I hear a logical argument, and not one based in any subjective emotions?”

“Might I ask what *your* logical reasons are—which of course won’t be based on subjective emotions—for excluding Sogou-san’s group from training?”

“Excuse me? D-did you... Correct me if I’m wrong, but did you just answer a question with another question? No one in their right mind would attempt something so childish, I’m sure. Are you quite well?”

“I could ask the same of you, Goddess.”

“Hmm~?”

“I find it hard to believe that *you* are in your right mind when you say things like that, casting aspersions on my sister and I—S-class and A-class heroes.”

“Ah, Hijiri-san, you are correct—but I simply didn’t explain this properly. I trust Sogou-san’s abilities completely, that’s all. Please, don’t misinterpret my indelicacy as malice. Hmm, but this is quite the dilemma! I can hardly call back my disciples from the other nations...”

She looked over the instructors she had gathered.

“It will be more work for no additional pay...are there any admirable individuals among you who will agree to look after Sogou and her friends? No, of course not. None of you would.”

“Want me to do it?”

“Hmm?”

The man she had introduced as Banewolf—otherwise known as the Dragonslayer—spoke.

“Are you entirely sure, Bane?”

“They’re promising heroes, aren’t they? We should do everything we can to make sure they stay alive.”

“I see.”

Banewolf stroked his beard.

“Unless you had something else in mind when you refused this group an instructor.”

“Excuse me? What was that?”

“Forget I said anything. Hey, I’ll look after them, so how about some fine drink to sweeten the deal?”

“Oh ho ho, I *do* worry about you sometimes. That’s a small price to pay though, of course. ♪♪ I’ll furnish you with the finest money can buy.”

“Heh heh, cheers...”

“Ah, so the drink was your aim all along?”

“What do you think?”

The Dragonslayer was evading the Goddess’s questions, and Ayaka couldn’t tell what he really felt.

“Are you sure you can still fulfill all your duties to Yasu’s group, even with the extra load?”

“I’ll do everything I can to instruct them. Famously lazy, though, aren’t I? You should consider yourself lucky that I even agreed to assist you in the first place, no?”

“Very well. I’m counting on you.”

Banewolf scratched his head.

“Jeez. Those silences of yours are terrifying, you know...”

“The Demon King’s armies have been making big moves of late,” said the Goddess, ignoring Banewolf and moving on to her next topic. “The number of monsters gathering around the Nightwall is significantly higher than in past occurrences. The coming war will be on a much greater scale than I ever imagined. And of course...” She spread her arms wide and smiled compassionately. “You heroes, the pride of Alion, will be taking part in the next battle. Do keep that in mind as you continue your training. I’m counting on you all.”

MIMORI TOUKA

SEVERAL DAYS had passed since we left Monroy.

“Welcome back,” said Seras, looking up from the river where she was washing our clothes. I had just been to a village on a supply run, and we were now camping out in the forest.

“I’m so sorry to leave all the shopping to you, Sir Too-ka.”

“Nobody knows what I look like, so I can just pretend to be a traveler. It’s no problem.”

Seras smiled as she wrung the water from a shirt. “I don’t have quite the acting skills that you do.”

“I’m good at blending in with the crowd, that’s all.”

Elves and leopardmen always stood out. Seras could disguise her appearance somewhat, but her beauty always drew attention. And her disguises were limited—she couldn’t make big alterations to her gender, age, or facial features, and she couldn’t change the shape of her body. Apparently, the majority of her power’s strength was spent disguising her ears.

I handed over the things I’d bought to Seras.

“Once we make it to the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters, you won’t need to hide anymore. You can rest normally there, no need for my skill to send you to sleep.”

Using my skill to put her to sleep is kind of a loophole... Doesn’t seem like the spirits are complaining, though.

“Where are Eve and Lis?” I asked.

“They’re looking after the horses,” responded Seras.

I went over to greet them.

“Too-ka, you’re back!”

“Welcome back, Mr. Too-ka!”

“Squee~! ♪♪ ”

I’d left Piggymaru back at camp too. The little slime was wrapped

around Lis, with whom he had become fast friends.

“Well then, let’s eat,” I said.

The sun was already down, and the sky was growing dark. We had been lucky with the weather of late, blessed by sunny days and relatively mild temperatures. We sat in a circle around the fire and decided to eat everything I’d bought that wouldn’t last longer than a day. Before long, we had roasted meat, fruit, and a pot of stew bubbling on the fire. Lis was in charge of the seasoning.

“I...I hope it’s to your liking,” she said.

I brought the soup to my mouth and sipped.

Whoa, this is delicious.

“I think you’re going to have to be in charge of the cooking from now on,” I said.

“Th-Thank you!”

“Sqmm~! ♪♪”

Sounds like Piggymaru likes it too... It was always weird to see the slime turn into a bowl to drink soup, the liquid disappearing without a trace.

Liz crouched down to stroke Piggymaru.

“Hee... Thanks, Piggymaru...”

“Squee~! ♪♪”

Seras was already starting to tidy up the dishes.

“I’ll clean up here—help Lis get changed, will you?” I said.

I bought Lis some clothes and armor while I was in town. Nobody else had clothes that fit her, so she had been wearing the same outfit for some time. We were on the verge of entering the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters too—I was hardly about to let her walk in unprotected.

Worse comes to worst, she’s going to need some way of defending herself.

“This is the only armor I could find that would fit you,” I said to Lis. There hadn’t been many choices when it came to protection for someone her size. “I heard some noble guy bought this as a gift for his daughter. She wore the stuff once then tossed it away—hated it.” Lucky for us, the nobleman had pawned it in a nearby village.

Seras was checking over the armor.

“It looks like a full set...more focused on appearance than practical use, but it’s good quality.”

Much better protection than what she’s wearing right now. I wonder what she thinks about it.

I glanced over at Lis.

“What do you think? Do you like it?”

“O-of course! Thank you so much, Mr. Too-ka!”

“Hey, you don’t *have* to say yes or anything. You can say if you don’t like it, okay?”

“N-no, I love it! Thank you s-so much for taking the trouble to buy this for me. I’m so happy!”

...She’s way too honest.

“Seras...I get that it’s a full set of armor, but go ahead and change out parts or add cloth wherever you think it’s needed. It looks like it might be sort of revealing.”

Seras smiled and laughed a little.

“Right, understood.”

I hated those sick noblemen.

“Mr. Too-ka, wh-what in the world is this...? This...” Lis held both hands to her mouth, practically shaking with excitement. “Oh... This is unbelievable, almost...”

Eve growled. Piggymaru was trembling too.

“Squ... Squ-ue...”

We’d finished dinner, and I’d just handed out the snacks that the leather pouch sent me a few days ago—cookies covered in white chocolate.

“I always liked these things.” I divided them up equally between the four of us, plus one for Piggymaru.

“It will not open,” said Eve, struggling with the packaging.

“Give it here.” I opened the plastic packaging and handed her the cookie.

“You opened it so easily...”

“It’s made to be opened easily.”

Eve stared at the package and narrowed her eyes, fixated on the cookie inside.

“I simply can’t believe it. This carving on the white part...how is it so detailed? What kind of craftsman could...”

She trailed off, amazed at the image stamped into the chocolate.

“This bag, too, is incomprehensible. This smoothness... What material is it made of?”

“Nnh!”

Lis was struggling with her packaging too.

Are they avoiding the spiky bits on the edge? They don’t think that bit’s dangerous or anything, do they?

I opened Lis’s cookie for her.

“Here.”

“Oh, Mr. Too-ka, thank you for helping m—”

“Just eat already.”

“O-okay.”

I bit into one, enjoying the different textures of the chocolate and cookie layers. The hard chocolate started to melt, and the subtly sweet cookie broke apart in my mouth, releasing a faint wave of salty flavor. It combined with the taste of the white chocolate racing across my tongue to create the ultimate sweetness.

Chocolate and cookies go incredibly well together, huh? Nothing beats this.

Lis munched on hers like a hamster. She seemed to be trying to hold herself back but was soon lost in the taste.

“They’re delicious, aren’t they, Piggymaru?!”

“Squee~! ♪♪”

“Mr. Too-ka... I’ve never eaten *anything* this good before in my life,” said Lis.

“This kind of surprise is nice from time to time, huh?” I replied.

“The world you used to live in must be an incredible place,” said

Eve.

I ended up telling Eve and Lis about myself—that I was a hero from another world.

No reason to hide it from them.

I explained that the snacks came from my old world. The heroes were well known throughout the continent, so while I told Eve and Lis plenty of things that surprised them, the fact that another world existed wasn't a shock.

Makes things easier to explain.

"From our perspective, your world seems incredible..."

I remembered the reaction Seras had to eating the cheese tart.

The grass is always greener on the other side, I guess? Anyway, Seras sure is being quiet...

"What's up, Seras?"

"I...love—."

"Huh?"

"Oh, I mean... Nothing! These snacks are quite delicious," she said, flustered.



She ate slowly but seemed to really enjoy it.

Is she trying to stay the cool vice-captain in front of Eve and Lis? I bet she's holding back from saying more. She's practically glowing.

"Are Eve and Lis already in bed?" I asked.

"Yes, they're sound asleep," said Seras.

It was just about time for me to take my turn on watch. I sat down next to her and fished around in my bag.

"Hey, here."

"This is..."

"Take it." I'd only eaten one bag of my share of the cookies, and I handed her the rest.

"Are you sure?"

"You like them, right?"

"But I..."

"I used to eat them all the time in the old world. It's fine."

Seras's expression was usually inscrutable, but there was something special about the face she made when it came to snacks.

"A-are you absolutely sure?"

"Don't worry about it. I've gotta give treats to my vice-captain, don't I?"

"T-treats...?"

"I'm kidding. It's a reward for all the work you've done, that's all," I said, turning back to *Forbidden Arts: The Complete Works* in my lap.

"You're always reading that book, Sir Too-ka..."

"Knowledge is power, right? Especially when it comes to this thing. I'm re-reading too, whenever I can find the time."

I should be able to find ingredients for the next stage of Piggymaru's monster enhancement solution in the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters. It causes huge leaps in the little guy's combat abilities—Piggymaru was invaluable against the Black Dragon Knights and Ashint. I should prioritize making him stronger in the days to come.

"Sir Too-ka?"

“Huh?”

Seras deftly opened the plastic packaging, broke the cookie in two, and held one half out to me.

“A treat...for you,” she said, smiling.

“Bossy for a vice-captain, aren’t you?”

“Take it.”

“Nh.”

I took the cookie with my mouth.

Her fingers are so thin...how does she hold a sword with them?

“We’re almost there,” she said.

“Yeah...”

“It’s strange. I almost don’t even feel scared about where we’re going.”

“If my powers work on the monsters there, I’m sure that’ll put your mind at ease.”

Will my status effect skills work on the monsters we’re facing next? Will they affect the humanoid monsters? How many of them are like the Soul Eater? I guess I’ll find out soon enough.

“Heh, we’re counting on you. I’ll do my best to make you feel you can count on me too.”

“Don’t worry, I already do.”

Seras was quiet for a moment as she took a bite of cookie.

“By the way, Sir Too-ka... Not to change the subject, but I’ve thought of a name for our mercenary band.”

“You think we need a name?”

“Yes. We might need to announce ourselves formally after leaving the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters.”

She’s thinking that far ahead?

“I see. Now that you mention it, it seems like a good idea.” I remembered the mercenary recruitment back in Mils—someday we might need to formally participate in an event like that.

“This is just an idea, but how about The Lord of the Flies Brigade?”

“Ha. Why that?”

“In legends, it’s the name of the Lord of the Flies’s forces. The name itself is well known, but I’ve never heard of any other group taking up the title.”

“The Lord of the Flies Brigade, huh? That’s not half bad.”

I placed my hand on the fly mask in my bag.

“Let’s go with it.”

I put Seras to sleep and set the book I’d been reading aside.

“Still...it hasn’t faded, not even a little,” I murmured to nobody.

I thought time would heal these wounds. I thought I would forget, or that things would resolve themselves.

But nothing had changed.

My desire for revenge against that foul Goddess was still burning hot inside me. What if she was already dead, somewhere far away where I’d never find her? She couldn’t die on me like that.

“Can’t have the Demon King’s armies coming in and killing you quick, spoiling my fun...”

Use Kirihara and the others to prop yourself up, do whatever it takes—just survive. Stay alive until I’m ready to take my revenge... Stay the “compassionate” foul Goddess I know you are.

It’d be smarter for me to forget my revenge. I *knew* that. If only I could be merciful and forgive her for what she did to me.

I’m a fool—I’ve accepted that.

I’m ugly and mean—I know that too.

And mean, ugly fool Mimori Too-ka is going to send you straight to hell, Vicius.

“I don’t imagine she’ll die that easy, though...”

She’s stubborn. She’ll cling to life.

“The Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters.”

Golden-Eyed monsters...

Humanoid monsters...

Fearsome enemies...

I can't afford to be complacent. I know that, and yet...

It's no use.

I couldn't suppress the hope swelling in my chest. This place was going to be dangerous, maybe even fatal, but...there were experience points waiting for me in there. Millions and millions of them.

My stats were low, I knew that—but they weren't nothing. I felt it in the fight against Ashint and the baron's men. Every time I fired off a skill, I could feel my stats working to support me, pulling me up from the bottom. I might not be able to get as strong as an S-class or A-class hero, but if I focused on raising my stats as much as possible, I could close the gap between us.

Now *there* was a good reason to level up.

One point might be the difference between life and death for me. As long as my status effect skills work there, I know what I'm going to do...

“Kill them. Murder them. Exterminate them all.”

That's the next step. A foothold on my path to revenge.

“Annihilate every last one of them and turn them into EXP.”

Epilogue

WE MADE OUR WAY to the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters without incident, all of us more comfortable avoiding the main roads and towns. Eve and Lis had traveled together in the past and had to stay similarly under the radar, and Seras had spent months on the run. Even I had journeyed incognito for a while at this point, so we were all accustomed to this kind of trip. Eve had sharp ears and could see in the dark, and she proved herself more useful by the day as we traveled through the forest.

She returned from the top of a hill to report her findings to us.

“It’s been a real journey, but we’ve arrived at the border.”

Once we crest this hill, we’ll be entering the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters.

We’d taken a detour to avoid the fortresses stationed on the border, there to prevent monsters from escaping. While it was rare, monsters did sometimes get out, and there were areas where border security was weak. We’d encountered several monsters so far, but none had been any match for us.

At Eve’s suggestion, we’d decided to release our horses and proceed on foot, packing as lightly as possible for the trip.

“It looks like the Sea of Trees...” I said, standing next to Eve atop the hill and looking over the dark forest stretching out before us. It was shrouded in deep fog—we couldn’t even see the other side.

It all looks so quiet from up here...

“What’s that?” I asked. There was a large tree in the middle of the forest, towering over its neighbors.

“That’s the Corrupted Tree. Used to be sacred, apparently, in ages past. It’s become a sort of symbol of this whole area.”

Isn’t this place also called the Great Ruins? So there was a civilization here before. Not to mention the ruins in Mils... Was there a whole other world on this continent before the present one?

“Hm?”

I heard a cry from the forest, far off in the distance. A scream? The noise made my skin crawl—it reminded me of the Soul Eater’s voice.

I get it.

“They’re welcoming us in.”

We decided to rest for the night before venturing any further, wanting to be in peak condition for the fight ahead. I breathed a sigh of relief once our camp was set up.

“So Eve, do you remember where the witch lives?”

“No,” she replied.

“Huh? Oh, right, you must have a map.”

“No, no map.”

Wait a second... No, it's fine. Eve knows where the Forbidden Witch lives, Seras's lie detector has already confirmed that for sure.

“Don’t worry about it, Too-ka.” Eve stood up, looked down at me and reached out her hand.

“Stand up. I need you to put it in me.”

I stood and looked at her, puzzled. “Wait, *what?*”

“Your mana. Pour it into me.”

“Oh. Where should I—?”

“My right arm.”

“...All right.”

Eve’s voice was confident, as if she knew exactly what she was doing. I gripped her hand. Aside from the claws, it felt rough but otherwise human.

“I should just pour it straight into your hand?”

“Hmph. We leopardmen, like elves, aren’t suited to channeling our own mana. It takes too long. With a talented human like you, though, this should only take a moment.”

I don't know about talented...but I think I've got the hang of pouring mana into stuff.

“Here goes.”

My hand began to glow a pale white, and the light slowly made its way to the palm of Eve's hand.

"Nh... It's a strange feeling, having mana poured into you."

A small symbol appeared on her palm and floated up into the air, expanding before my eyes like a hologram.

It looks like my stat screen, almost...

Seras and Lis were just staring at it, their eyes wide and mouths open. Piggymaru let out a squee, apparently also impressed.

The symbol began to change shape.

"Is this...a map?"

"Mm-hm. The green point is where we are right now."

I spotted a flashing red dot off on the far side.

"So this dot to the north must be...?"

"Where the Forbidden Witch is. That's how my father explained it to me."

"I see."

"There's no way of mapping this forest, but with this to guide us, we can navigate toward the red dot."

"Did the witch herself make that map?"

"So it is said."

"Wait, you mean you've never actually met her?"

"I haven't."

Eve explained that the map was passed down through generations, from one clan chief to the next.

That meant Eve was the daughter of the chief of her clan, right? I put that thought aside—no need to press her now. We had a way to find the witch, and that was plenty.

Progress was slow, but I was finally on my way to obtaining that forbidden magic.

"Let's get some rest."

I turned on my heel, the sea of trees at my back.

"Tomorrow we're finally going in...to the Land of the Golden-

Eyed Monsters.”

Afterword

THANKS TO ALL YOUR SUPPORT, volume three is finally here! This is Kaoru Shinozaki.

Doesn't Seras Ashrain look beautiful on the cover? I often think about wanting the printed books to be all about Seras, and it seems everything is going to plan. Perhaps you might enjoy lining up all the volumes now to show them off?

I ended up putting a lot of new material into this third volume—I hope I was able to shine more of a spotlight on Seras in that respect too. I think I delivered on my promise of diving deeper into Seras and Touka's relationship, and I really want this to be a story about the two of them moving forward (as much as the page limits allow).

By the way, I live with two cats and they've really gotten attached to me now—way more than when they first arrived. Did you enjoy the leopardman in this volume? They say housecats are just like big cats... I wonder if Eve will start getting attached to a certain someone too? I've seen videos of lions and leopards getting along with humans—it's always been a dream of mine to have a ferocious animal like that as a friend.

I'd also like to apologize to my editor, O-sama. I'm sorry for all the trouble this third volume caused. This series is only able to continue because of your constant support and hard work. Thank you also to KWKM-sama for your moving, incredible design and illustration work in this volume. Your pictures always draw out new life and character from Seras and the others for me. I always think that this work wouldn't be at all what it is today without your illustrations. Thank you again to everybody who made this possible.

I also want to thank everybody who reads the web version for their continued support. I hope this print version has expanded the world—thank you so much for coming along for the journey. Thank you for buying this book, and for letting me continue to pile up the volumes.

I hope we meet again in the next book, where our heroes will finally dive into the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters.

—Kaoru Shinozaki



Thank you for reading!

Get the latest news about your favorite Seven Seas books and brand-new licenses delivered to your inbox every week:

[Sign up for our newsletter!](#)

Or visit us online:

gomanga.com/newsletter